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BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

A FORBIDDEN, ANIMALISTIC LOVE

Beauty and the Beast

A forbidden, animalistic love

Layla Knight

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First Edition.

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Disclaimer:

This is not a werewolf book. There is no concept of mates in this book, fated or otherwise.

To everyone reading this, don’t give up.
Your Beast is waiting for you.

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Coming Soon
Thank you!

Chapter One

"Why are you so insistent on torturing me?"

You're the one torturing me.

"Why can't you ever just listen to me?"

You could try listening to me for a change.

"Why did you have to be all the things I didn't want in a daughter?"

Why did you have to be the worst mother in all of Stowe?

There were very few things in the world that hurt me. Mostly because I knew of no person with a tongue sharper and heart colder than my mother.

My biological father abandoned my mother before I was born, and we washed clothes for all of Stowe to put pathetic scraps of food on our plates. Those two facts alone were enough to cast us as the runts of the village.

Bottom feeders.

People whispered it behind our backs, but not many had the nerve to say it to our faces. Not when they knew they would receive a ferocious tongue-lashing from my mother.

"Why is your hair always so knotty?" My mother groaned, pulling my head back. My neck began to ache as she fought against the enemy–my hair.

It's not knotty. It's curly. Like yours.

"I blame your hair."

"What for?" I asked.

"If your hair wasn't so knotty and the colour of fire, you would have a husband by now." She grumbled as she continued to assault me. "At least I would have been rid of you that way."

There was my mother's sharp tongue that I mentioned earlier.

A painful pang struck my heart and slowly consumed the rest of my body, making the feeling impossible to ignore. Even after suffering through nineteen years with my mother, her harsh words still hurt me.

"When was the last time you brushed your hair?"

"This morning," I mumbled under my breath, wincing as she yanked my head this way and that way. She tried to part it through the middle, but that only made my scalp sore.

"You could have fooled me by the state of you." She snorted.

I've been working all day by your side. Isn't that more important than how I look at the end of it?

I bit back the pain by digging my teeth into my bottom lip.

"I just remembered! Did you hear the news?" She suddenly asked, her voice laced with excitement as she parted my hair into three sections for a braid. We performed this ritual every night so my hair wouldn't become even more knotty and wild during the night, but it never got any easier and my mother never eased up.

Like my mother's, my hair was red, fiery, and untameable, and unlike anyone else's in the village. I didn't know what displeased her more, the colour of my hair or hers.

"Hear what?" I asked, not all that curious as I aimlessly stared out into the darkness out the window we were yet to shut for the night.

"We'll be getting some visitors soon. I'm so excited! We haven't had visitors in so long!"

"Visitors? We never get any visitors." I frowned, confused, and bit back a yelp when she delivered yet another sharp tug.

"Not us." She huffed. "The chief is expecting some guests soon. I heard they'll be staying until the spring. You know what that means."

Yes, I know what you're like.

She tutted at my silence, yet again disappointed with me. These days, it was like I could do nothing right.

"Spring isn't until several months. They'll be with us the entire time so marriage will be inevitable."

"Well, if the visitors are women, then that can't have anything to do with me." I sincerely wished they were all female to get my mother off my back. They hadn't even arrived yet, and she was already beginning to hound me.

"Rumours say it's the chief's nephew and some of his friends. Three or four of them. That's three or four potential suitors for you."

"We can't possibly know that. They might not be visiting with the intent to marry."

"Oh, stop being so negative, Renalia!" She chastised.

I'm not being negative. I just want you to leave me alone. I know I'll never be happy with the man you choose for me.

"You'll never find yourself a husband with that attitude. Men want women that are young and happy. They don't want a sad, mopey, negative thing like you. You'll never find a husband at this rate, and I'll be stuck with you forever. Is that what you want for me? Is it?" She threw her hands up in the air dramatically. "Stop being so selfish and think of your poor mother for a change."

And there's her infamous cold heart.

"Sorry, mother." I apologised and bowed my head as she finished off my hair.

"You must marry one of those men, Renalia."

"We don't know anything about them."

"You don't have any grounds to be fussy. We have barely enough money for a pitiful dowry, and you're no good at cooking. You're tolerable at cleaning, but that's only because you've been doing it beside me for years. You're not worth much, Renalia, and don't have the personality to entice a man with any status, so get off your high horse and look at the grass. It's not as green as you think it is in that fantasy land you live in."

My heart ached, but I kept my head bowed so she wouldn't see the pain on my face. It would only make things worse for me.

"You must realise how important it is that you marry one of these men, Renalia. You must make one of them your husband."

"Yes, mother."

"You'll need to brush your hair every day, work harder in the kitchen, and be more positive. A negative attitude is not bewitching on any woman, but it's worse on you. I think it has something to do with your hair."

"Yes, mother."

"And you need to stop going for those stupid walks every night. Between cooking for your husband, cleaning his hut, and performing your marital duties, you won't have any time for them when you're married. You should get into the habit of stopping them now."

The older I got, the more obsessed she became that I marry and start my own family. Now that I was nineteen, the obsession bordered on unhealthy.

“I best enjoy those walks while I'm still a free woman."

My mother pursed her lips and glared at me. I think she was glad to get rid of me for a short while every night. It gave her the peace she needed to fall asleep, and it gave me freedom in at least one aspect of my life. It also temporarily relieved me from the constant criticism.

"I won't be long." I insisted.

"Do what you want, but don't get caught walking in the darkness." She warned me as she did every night. "You'll ruin yourself if someone catches you. I can already hear the rumours that would fly around all of Stowe."

"Don't worry, mother. No one will see me." I assured her and slipped out of the hut before she could change her mind.

I had donned a thin shawl over my smock to keep me warm, but it did little to protect me against the chilly winds of winter passing. With my head down, I scurried down the winding path that led away from our hut and merged into the one that ran around the entire village.

For as long as I could remember, I loved taking long walks through the forest regardless of the weather or time of day. There was something so peaceful about being alone and at one with nature. Out here, there was no mother to sneer at me, or constantly criticise me for every little thing. The forest didn't have any clothes for me to wash, nor any snide remarks from some girls who I made the mistake of thinking were my friends in the past.

Out here, it was just me, my thoughts, and the beautiful forest.

It was probably the only thing keeping me sane.

Without the forest to escape to whenever I needed, without the fresh air, the beautiful nature and wildlife that I loved so dearly, I was afraid that I would eventually turn into my mother.

A lonely, bitter, miserable old hag.

My mother, on the other hand, had never been a fan of this trait of mine. But then again, not heeding well to instructions was yet something else she despised about me. Walking in the forest nearly every day also meant that the bottom of my dress was never as pristine or clean as all the other young girls around the village–yet another thing my mother disapproved of and claimed would be the reason why I would never get married.

No one will marry me because I have a mother like you. I don't want to marry and have children only to treat them the way you treated me my whole life.

I don't want to be like you.

I'd rather be alone my whole life than turn out like you.

Maybe my mother was right. Maybe I was unlovable, and no man would want to marry me. Ever.

Then I'd be stuck living with her for the rest of my life.

I turned nineteen in the autumn, and some of the girls my age in Stowe had already gotten married so the pressure was on. Unlike our male counterparts who would often remain unmarried well past thirty, we poor females were all but shunned if we didn't acquire a husband by twenty, so time wasn't exactly working in my favour here.

My pity party came to a pause when some rustling sounded in the not-so-distant distance. My breath hitched in my throat at the sudden sound, and I stopped in my tracks. My breathing evened out and my actions were slow as I glanced over my shoulder to pinpoint the source of the sudden sound.

Was someone following me?

Was it my mother coming to look for me? No. She didn't care enough for me to come into the forest.

Was it someone else from the village that followed me out here? It had never happened before, but it was possible.

Was today the day I would finally get caught?

"Renalia, stop scaring yourself," I murmured under my breath, desperately trying to calm myself down, but it was no use.

My actions were rushed as I began retreating, taking the same steps I had taken to make it this far into the forest. I hadn't even made it half my usual distance, but the forest was a little too spooky and unsettling tonight for my liking.

The louder the rustling got, sounding like it was encompassing me from every possible angle, the more I hastened to escape the forest, but after an unfortunate trip over a branch I hadn't seen, I was sent tumbling to the ground.

Mother is going to be so mad when she sees I dirtied another dress!

My palms stung and ached from bracing for the fall, but I quickly rose to my feet. Before I could hike up the bottom of my dress and run to the

safety of my shabby little hut, something dark flashed in the corner of my eye.

I managed to take two fearful steps back before I tripped over yet another branch, sending me tumbling to the ground once again. The scream was trapped in my throat as I stared into the deepest, purest, most inhumane pair of golden eyes I had ever seen.

And then everything went black.

Chapter Two

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One minute I was walking through the forest like I usually did, and the next, something rammed into my side, knocked me off my feet and forced me into a world of darkness.

My eyes flew open when I gained consciousness again, and my first instinct was to scream.

"Help!"

I didn't know who I was screaming for or if someone was nearby to help me, but it was dark, and I couldn't see. And I was scared.

“Please help me! I need help! I can't see anything!"

Something flickered in the distance, and I went deathly silent as a soft thud sounded nearby.

"Is someone there?" I whispered. With my shawl nowhere to be seen, my bare arms were covered with goosebumps. And not from the cold.

The soft thudding sound got louder and louder. Whatever, or whoever it was, was only growing closer to me.

"Hello? Is someone–" My words were cut off by a strangled, fearful gasp when I felt something furry brush up against my ankle. My body stilled and tensed; my eyes widened in fear of the unknown. The soft fur brushed up against my legs until finally, something heavy dropped at my feet.

When my eyes finally adjusted to the darkness and I could make out what was sitting at my feet, watching me with the most intense gaze I had ever seen, I couldn’t believe it.

I wanted to run far, far from it, but I was too scared to move.

I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs for help, but I was too scared to make a sound.

A quieter, shriller shriek escaped me as my leg kicked out at the creature, and I scooted away. I didn’t make it very far as my back pressed against the wall, leaving me nowhere else to go. There was a faint light in the distance–from the direction the creature had come from–but he was blocking the way.

If I tried to make a run for it, he would catch me, and I didn’t want to know what would happen if this creature got his paws on me.

His fur was thick and dark. It was darker around his face and mouth, wet and matted with something. I feared it was blood.

The creature was large. Far too large to be a wolf. His eyes were the darkest shade of golden amber I had ever seen, his teeth sharp and slightly salivating at the corner of his mouth as he stared up at me.

My eyes stung with tears as I pressed my back against the rocky wall of the cave, but it was no use. I was stuck here with this enormous creature pinning me with a gaze so intense and concentrated that I knew he intended me to be his next meal.

I should have listened to mother!

The nightly walks in the forest were a bad idea, and now I was going to pay for it with my life!

"Please don't eat me,” I begged in a faint whisper. My eyes were squeezed shut, and my body shaking in fear. It was a useless attempt as the creature wouldn't understand me, but I was just so scared.

"I doubt I taste good." I sniffled, my vision going blurry as tears streamed freely down my face.

Now that the dam had broken, it was like a waterfall.

I was sure that I looked quite the sight to this wild animal. My nose was leaking, and my face was probably blotchy like it always was when I cried. Hopefully, it would make me look unappealing, and it wouldn’t want to eat me anymore. It wasn't like I had much meat on my bones anyway.

"There's not much of me to eat. My mother and I can’t afford much, so we mostly eat greens or whatever is cheap or soon to go off. I’m sure I don’t taste good. Not meaty at all. Please don't–"

My insane blabbering was cut off by a loud gasp when the creature suddenly pushed up on his hind legs to stand up. It looked like he was

going to leap at me, and I cried out as I shielded my face. It would do nothing to save me, but I hoped at least my face would be recognisable when the people of Stowe eventually found my body. Not that my mother would care. For her, this was probably a blessing in disguise. It would save her from having to pay a pitiful dowry she had been saving my whole life for.

"People not food." A foreign voice suddenly said, loud and clear, ricocheting off the walls of the echoey cave.

My body stiffened even more than it already was, and my eyes flew open. A shaky breath escaped me as I lowered my arm, and I blinked hard at the sight of the big, naked man towering over me in place of the creature that mere moments ago, I feared would eat me.

In place of the wild creature was now a man.

A naked man.

A naked, very well-endowed man who had the same hungry glint in his eyes as the creature did.

A warm flush spread over my cheeks, and I turned to look away. If this wasn't my first time being so close to a naked person before–let alone a naked man–I would have worried about how this man had replaced the creature in a few moments. It was plausible that the creature could have left the cave, and the man walked in, and I had simply missed the exchange, but I struggled to believe it.

Their eyes were uncannily alike. So alike in fact, that I was certain they were the same which would only mean one thing.

The creature and this man were one.

"What?" I finally managed to say.

"People not food." The man repeated, making no move to cover his nakedness.

I gulped, hard. My face only reddened, and the flush spread over my body, warming me from the inside out as I spied his male organ twitch. Almost as if it knew that I was stealing a glance at it.

"How did you do that?” I forced the words out in a quiet, fearful whisper. "How did you turn from an animal into a human? How is that possible?"

"Head."

"What?" I asked, snapping my head toward him but making sure my eyes remained above his shoulders the whole time.

"You…hit head."

"I did?"

The naked man nodded and raised a large, hesitant hand toward me. His skin was so tan–darker than anyone in all of Stowe–and his hand was easily double the size of mine. His movements were slow and calculated, and his stare intense but hesitant, as if he didn't mean to startle me.

"What are you doing?" I asked, leaning away from his touch. His hand dropped to his side, but the intense stare remained, carefully watching my every move.

"Head." That was the only warning he unapologetically offered before he reached out for me again. Before I could pull away, he dug his fingers into my hair, his grip firm, but his touch gentle. His fingers moved swiftly through my curly, unruly strands, inspecting my head for any injuries.

I gulped and dared not move–hardly breathing by this point–in fear that he would snap my neck. I allowed him to tip my head in all directions, rough yet gentle at the same time.

"No blood." He told me in a gruff voice once he was finished with his inspection, though he didn't drop his hands.

“That's good," I whispered, unable to bring myself to meet his eyes. "What are you?"

"Beast."

"What?" I gulped in fear. "A beast? You're a beast? Or is Beast your name?"

The man–*Beast*, as he called himself–shrugged.

"Beast." He repeated.

"I don't understand. What do you mean you're a beast?" My eyebrows furrowed together, blinking hard at this man who spoke in riddles and made no sense at all. "How did you turn from that creature into you?"

“Me Beast." The man groaned as he bowed his head, looking more frustrated with himself than with me. "Name…Beast."

"Oh." My lips parted in a circle as understanding dawned on me. "Beast is an unusual name." The name felt strange on my tongue. "My name is Renalia. My mother named me after her father's favourite flower."

"Renalia,” Beast tested the name on the tip of his tongue with an indescribable look on his face. "Renalia…flower?"

"Yes." I gulped and nodded my head cautiously. "What are you, Beast? How did you transform into a human?"

"Beast." He repeated, his eyebrows furrowing in confusion as he struggled to understand what I was asking him.

Surely this couldn't be so difficult to understand!

This man…creature….Beast…whatever he was, had to know that normal humans didn’t turn from a furry creature into a human in a matter of seconds like it was nothing.

"Yes, you already told me your name is Beast, how did you do that?” I asked with wide eyes, returning his stare. "How did you just transform into a human? I don’t understand how that’s possible. What are you? You can't be human."

"You…pretty flower,” Beast murmured, reaching out to trap a lone piece of dark auburn hair between his thumb and forefinger and following the natural curl.

"Thank you." I blushed ferociously and averted my eyes, clearing my throat awkwardly.

One moment I was deathly afraid that Beast was going to eat me alive and unable to believe that he had just turned into a human, and the next, I was blushing at him calling me a pretty flower.

What was going on here?

And why did one dark look from Beast have my core pulsing in need for him in a way that I had never felt before?

What kind of sorcery was this?

Chapter Three

“Renalia pretty flower.” Beast complimented me in a gruff voice, tugging harder on my hair.

I yelped at the slight pain but dared not say anything, not even when he dragged my face to his. I gulped when the pointed tip of his nose pressed against mine, and we breathed the same air–me inhaling while he exhaled. It was only when my knees began to throb painfully from kneeling on the rocky cave ground that I dared to pull away.

“No,” Beast grunted. “Don’t go,” he whispered in the softest, gentlest voice I had ever heard. It was a complete contrast to his vast size.

“I need to get back home. My mother is probably waiting for me.” I tried to excuse myself.

“Home.” Beast patted the ground of the cave before pointing to himself. “Cave home.”

“Yes, I understand this is your home, but it’s not my home.” I slowly rose to my feet as I spoke, hoping to sneak away. “My home is back in Stowe.”

“Stowe.” His nose scrunched up at the bridge, a distasteful expression taking over his face. “Cave. Home.” His voice was louder than before as he asserted his dominance, demanding that I stay.“Very pretty flower,” Beast murmured, his eyes dazed and lost as he leaned closer.

This time, he kept going until his lips brushed against mine, a featherlight touch, and then when I didn’t pull away, he pressed them harder against mine.

My first instinct was to pull away. My eyes widened, and a startled squeak escaped me, but my body wouldn’t cooperate.

When I felt Beast's wet tongue attempt to slip into my mouth, I forcefully pushed against his chest and plastered my back to the cave wall behind me, staring at him with wide, not-so-fearful eyes.

"What are you doing?" I whispered, reaching a hand up to brush my fingertips against my bottom lip where the earthy, primal, delicious taste of him still lingered.

That was my first kiss.

According to my mother, I was supposed to share it with my husband, but instead, I had given it away to an inhumane creature that lived in the forest.

My mother often told me that this sort of thing–kissing and more intimate acts–was only to be shared between a man and his wife. She said that such vulgarity was wrong before marriage, but Beast had just stolen my first kiss and it didn't feel wrong in any way. On the contrary, it felt more right than I could begin to explain.

His lips were rough, and he had used far too much teeth for it to be remotely close to the sweetness that I expected of a first kiss, but I couldn't bring myself to care. Not when I had enjoyed it so much.

I shouldn't have enjoyed it, but I did.

Why did it feel that way?

When Beast leaned in and demanded my attention, I didn't have time to ponder the question.

"Prettiest pretty flower." He growled quietly against my mouth, sharply nipping at the bottom, plumper lip before pulling away.

Even though I knew that I shouldn't, and there were so many unanswered questions I couldn't seem to make him understand, let alone answer, I couldn't help but smile at the sweet compliment. I didn't get many compliments. Especially not from my mother.

Some girls around the village were nice, but they were all prettier than me. No doubt they would have an easier time finding a husband than I would–all because my hair was auburn, and similar coloured freckles marred my skin. No one else in our village looked like my mother or me. Their hair was either darker or lighter than ours, and none of them had dots scattered over their face–something which my mother blamed on the single Scotsman that one of her great-grandmothers had married against her family's wishes.

“What are you doing?” I asked when I felt him twist his hand around the bottom of my dress, pulling it up. “Beast, what are you doing?” I asked again when he didn’t reply, merely groaning against my lips in yet another hard kiss that had me licking along the seams of my lips, strangely wanting to savour the taste of him.

Did everyone react like this after their first kiss, or was I just strange?

“Off,” Beast demanded, his eyebrows furrowing together as he struggled to lift the bottom of my dress higher up my legs due to the way I was sitting.

“Off?” I questioned in surprise, reaching out to press my hand against his chest to stop his kisses, trying to ignore how good they felt.

When my hand met the warm, hard planes of his chest–particularly his left pectoral which flexed under my hand–I froze and glanced down. A warm flush took over my face, and I nearly gave myself whiplash when I forced my head up to look away from his hard cock which seemed to have grown in size since I had last stolen a peek.

How could I have forgotten that he was naked? My cheeks flamed at the thought of it.

“Off,” Beast repeated, his words snapping me out of my daze.

“What?” I couldn’t help but gape in question, and regardless of my stupefied state, I found myself moving back to free my skirt from under my knees, allowing him to bunch up the material and reveal the milky white of my thighs. Instead of recoiling, I was oddly excited and struggled to contain the anticipation of what was to come.

“Want…this?” Beast asked in a low tone, staring up at me from under his long, dark lashes. He fisted the bottom of my skirt which was now bundled at the very top of my thighs. Any higher and my womanhood would be revealed to him in all its glory–a part of me that only me and my mother had seen, and the last time she had seen me completely naked was when I was a child.

I knew I should say no. I knew that I should push him away, pull down my skirt and attempt to escape the cave, but all I could do was swallow my nerves and help him the rest of the way. Desperate to free myself of the restrictive material just as much as he was.

“I do, but you’re going to have to untie me,” I told him, turning around and swiping my hair over my shoulder to grant him access.

My mother insisted I wear tight dresses like these to bed even though I hated it. Beast didn't seem to know a single thing about regular humans, but I hoped he could figure out the semi-complicated string mechanism so I could free myself of this contraption that my mother called *the dress* that would snag me a husband one day. Her words, not mine.

Was I really going to do this?

Was I going to give up my virginity to a man that wasn't my husband?

Was I going to have sex with this man–this *creature*–that I had just watched transform into a human in front of my very eyes?

What would my mother think?

I knew exactly what my mother thought. She thought that I would end up just like this–just like *her*. Living in the same old hut that she had lived in her whole life. She had never been married but had given birth to a child one winter when she was only eighteen. She hardly ever talked about my father but the few times she did, I knew that he didn't want anything to do with either of us.

"You got it?" I asked as I felt the dress loosening around my chest and waist, having had to guide him through it when he kept fumbling with the strings. I was pleasantly surprised by how careful and skilled he was with his fingers despite their abnormally large size.

Beast grunted his answer before the last of the dress tumbled off my shoulders and pooled around my hips.

I gulped, not once doubting that he was able to see the swells of my ample breasts from over my shoulder as he towered over me from behind. If I turned around, he would see even more of me. That thought should scare me, but instead, my body came alive with excitement and anticipation. It started from the very top of my head and spread all over my body before pooling in the space between my legs. My pussy tingled and clenched, a foreign feeling to me which was becoming more and more impossible to ignore with each passing second.

It wasn't like I was getting any younger, right?

With my heart on my sleeve and my dignity in his hands, I stood up and allowed my dress to drop to the ground and pool at my feet. I moved it out of the way before turning around to face Beast. Gulping down my fear and insecurities, I dropped myself on my knees in front of him, tentatively reaching out to cup his face and bring him closer for another kiss.

Beast pecked me once and then twice, growling against my lips hungrily before pulling away. Desire-filled shivers ran down my spine as his eyes raked up and down my body, focusing on my womanly curves which made me feel quite self-conscious, especially when most of the other girls in the village were thin and petite. I wasn't as large as some of the women who had birthed multiple children and been unable to shift the weight, but I wasn't as small as most girls my age either. I was somewhat awkwardly in the middle.

"Pretty Renalia." He exhaled before reaching out to drop his hand on my shoulder, gently pushing me to lay on my back. My breath hitched in my throat as he was quick to follow, laying his body on top of mine.

My legs instinctively spread to accommodate him, my face warming immensely when the thick, bulbous head of his cock settled between my pussy lips. All he had to do was thrust forward in one small motion, and he would be buried up to the hilt inside of me. Instead of being afraid, I found myself spreading my legs further to make more room for him and circled my arms around his shoulders, eager to close the little space between us that remained.

"I still don't know what you are," I whispered.

"Beast."

"Are you human?"

Beast glanced up at me for a moment and held my eyes. He gave me the slightest shake of his head and looked away. It should have scared me that he wasn't human. That he wouldn't tell me what he was, but instead, I found myself pulling him closer.

Maybe there was something wrong with me.

Maybe this was wrong.

Maybe I shouldn't have gone for a walk tonight, but I wasn't going to stop now. Not when my body burned in need, my core ached for him, and Beast was the only person capable of putting out the fire.

"You're quite handsome yourself," I murmured, guiding his bearded face down to mine, moaning against his lips as his hands wandered my body, touching and holding me like I was the most precious gem in the world. And right now, it truly felt like I was.

Beast's hands ran over the sides of my stomach, over my hips and the curve of my ass. His mouth followed suit before pausing at my breasts to

suck on a pebbled nipple. My body acted on its own accord as my back arched, pressing myself further into him and encouraging him to continue.

I moaned as he moved to pay equal attention to the other nipple, but the sound was quick to die on my lips when he pushed his hips into me, slowly piercing my pussy with his engorged, angry cock.

I felt a small pinch at first and winced as he pushed deeper into me. My eyes squeezed shut, and a single tear escaped, but he wiped it away with the pad of his thumb and pressed a soft kiss to my lips, swallowing my pained whimpers.

Thankfully, he rocked into me gently and it wasn't long before the pinching, uncomfortable sensation was quick to disappear and, in its place remained nothing but pleasure.

I knew it was wrong, but it felt so right that all I could do was squeeze my eyes shut and hold onto Beast, needing him to continue moving. Needing him to make me feel good.

A moan escaped me each time Beast retreated, pushing into me harder and deeper than before. As if that wasn't enough, he sucked his way from nipple to nipple, briefly pausing each time to suck hard on each one of them. My body trembled and quivered under his wondrous ministrations, my body moulded to his like a glove to a hand. I wound my arms tight around his shoulders and threw my head back, moving my hips along with him, meeting him thrust for thrust as I desperately chased my growing orgasm.

All thoughts of what my mother and the rest of the village would think vanished from my mind as I allowed myself to enjoy this moment, to enjoy the thick, throbbing cock of Beast who made me feel pleasure on a level that I didn't even know existed.

It was like he was determined to ruin me for any other man and creature.

It was working.

"Beast!" I threw my head back as the wanton moan escaped me, my eyes squeezing shut as I felt the knot in my stomach tighten, almost painfully, until it unravelled, and I came around his cock, coating both him and me in my juices.

Even after coming, my pussy clenched and tightened around his cock as he kept up his thrusts, though they quickly grew sloppy. His growls of pleasure and desire made my breasts tremble, and my pussy clenched

harder around him, desperate to feel the thick, hot milky semen paint my walls.

And with one particularly hard thrust that went deeper than all the ones before it, that's exactly what he did.

I had already come once, but with his warm, engorged cock jerking as he finished coming inside me, the knot in my stomach unwound as I came once again–my second orgasm being only moments since my first.

"I've never felt good like that before," I whispered into the darkness of the night, barely able to make out the hardened, chiselled planes of his face, hovering only an inch above mine.

"You like?" Beast asked, his chest rumbling against mine as he spoke.

"I really liked that." I couldn't help but grin, and the sound was quickly drowned out by a wanton moan when he rolled his hips teasingly into mine before pulling out.

While my pussy was still slick with our combined juices, his come still leaking out of me, he leaned down and pressed a kiss to the slick, throbbing bud before pulling away. Before I could ask where he was going so soon after such an intimate moment, I watched in a mix of awe and fear as he turned around and sprouted fur on his back, transforming into the beast once again.

Sparing me a beady glance over his shoulder, he tapped a paw on the ground twice before leaping out and disappearing into the darkness of the night.

Chapter Four

I awoke the next morning with a heavy fur blanket draped over me. It wasn't there when I had fallen asleep which meant that Beast must have returned sometime during the night however, glancing around the cave now, he was nowhere to be seen.

"Beast?" I called out, pushing myself into a sitting position.

My cheeks flamed at the realisation that I was completely nude. I rushed to grab the blanket, holding it up to my chest even though I was alone in the cave. They only got warmer and brighter as I spied my night-time smock splayed carelessly on the ground, far too dusty and dirty for my mother not to notice.

My face felt like it was the colour of a beet as memories from last night came rushing to my mind.

Had I really just allowed a man I didn't know to ravish me? To take from me the purity that my mother always lectured me to save for my husband even though she hadn't done the same.

No, scratch that. Beast wasn't a man. He had to be human to be classed as a man. After the way fur sprouted all over his body, his nose stretched into a big snout, and his teeth elongated into spikes sharp enough to rip through my skin and bones with minimum effort, I could safely conclude that Beast was no human.

But if Beast wasn't a human, then what was he? I hadn't been able to get a straight answer from him last night though admittedly after he commanded me to strip naked, I got a little distracted.

My cheeks flamed again–this time for the wrong reasons–and I rushed to my feet. When the junction between my thighs ached, sore after the

pounding it had taken last night, I cursed myself for moving too fast. When my legs ached and threatened to give out underneath me, I grabbed the rocky wall of the cave to steady myself.

Taking a few deep breaths, I willed for the pain to disappear. Groans, moans, and protests of pain escaped me as I reached for my dress and slipped it over my head. Once I grew accustomed to the soreness, I held my breath and scurried out of the cave without saying goodbye to Beast. Not that he was around for me to say goodbye to, but perhaps that was for the best.

My mother was going to kill me for being out all night, and then she was going to kill me for getting my dress dirty even though I would be the one to wash it.

Hopefully, what my mother didn't know couldn't hurt me.

That thought alone was enough to push me to escape the magnificent forest–which was only a tad bit less glorious during the early morning than it was late at night–before my mother awoke and discovered me missing. The plan quickly flew out the window when I rushed back only to find my mother waiting outside the hut, pacing back and forth with a furious scowl.

Please don't be too harsh on me. I didn't mean to stay out all night.

I gulped and paused in my tracks, contemplating turning around to head back into the forest, but it was too late. She had already seen me.

"Don't even think about it!" My mother glowered as she pointed a curled finger in my direction, menacingly beckoning me to her and what I could only assume was my doom.

"Sorry, mother." I was quick to apologise. I rushed to heed her instruction, not wanting to make things worse for myself.

"Do you know how worried I was when I woke up this morning to find you missing?" She threw her hands up in the air in frustration–more frustrated and angrier than I had ever seen her. "And then how angry I was to realise that you never came home from your walk last night?"

"Sorry, mother," I repeated my apology and bowed my head in shame, unable to bring myself to meet her eyes. Not when I knew what exactly I had been doing all night.

I had an irrational fear that if I looked her in the eye, she'll know exactly what I had been doing all night.

"I didn't mean to stay out so late. It just happened." I pleaded for her to understand. "I promise it won't happen again."

“Of course, it’s not going to happen again!” My mother screeched. “Where were you all night?” She didn’t give me the chance to answer as she pinched my earlobe between her thumb and index finger. Hard.

I shrieked in a mixture of surprise and pain from the sharp pinch, but nonetheless, I was quick to follow as she led me back into the hut. It wasn’t like I had much of a choice anyway. It would hurt so much more if I tried to resist.

“Please let go of my ear, mother. It hurts.” I whined; my fingers circled her wrist in an attempt to free myself. “I promise I didn’t mean to stay out so late. I fell asleep.”

“You fell asleep in the forest?”

I can’t tell you the truth. You’d disown me if you found out. Or worse.

“Yes.” I continued to whine, but the sound ceased quickly when she shot me a sharp glare. “I’m really sorry, mother. I’ll be more careful next time. I promise it won’t happen again.”

“It sure won’t happen again.” She snorted and braced her hands on her hips, an expectant look on her face. “Now, tell me, did you really fall asleep in the forest, or did you spend the night with a man? And don’t try lying to me because I know all the tricks of the trade. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, after all.”

I don’t know what you want me to say.

I don’t even think you realise that you’ve insulted us both, not just me.

“What? Of course, not.” I spluttered in denial. As Beast wasn’t human–something that I was still yet to come to terms with–I technically wasn’t lying. I hadn’t spent the night with a man last night. I had spent the night with Beast. “Why would you even think that?”

“Well, you went out for a walk last night and only returned just now. What else am I supposed to think?”

“I already told you. I fell asleep.” I sighed, starting to feel aggravated because the more we discussed the topic, the higher chance there was of me slipping up and spilling the truth. I would really be in trouble then. “It’s like you’re more worried if I was with someone, rather than if I got hurt or something bad happened to me.”

I know I’m lying, but why can’t you just believe me for once? I hardly ever lie to you. It’s not like you believe me when I do tell you the truth, anyway.

Am I ever going to catch a break?

“Of course, I was worried about your well-being!”

“Well, you could have started with that then, couldn’t you?”

“Don’t try to turn this around on me!” She huffed and before she could say anything else, I was saved by the bell. Literally.

The town bell only rang on very special occasions, important announcements, or emergencies.

“That’s the bell! It must be something important. I guess we’ll have to put a pin in this conversation.” I feigned innocence while trying not to look too relieved. If my mother saw through the act, I would suffer more than just a sore earlobe.

“Where do you think you’re going?” She snorted, guiding me toward the rack of clean clothes and away from the door of our hut I had attempted to escape through. “Your dress is horrendously dirty, and your hair has leaves in it. People can’t see you like this. You have to change first.”

“But we’ll be late.” I tried to reason, but my mother’s harsh glare was enough to shut me up.

With my mother watching with her beady eyes, I quickly changed into my favourite emerald green dress. It was plain, and the colour made my hair look fierier than it was, but I loved the way I looked and felt in it.

Of course, my mother hated it.

“Did you have to wear that dress?” My mother sighed as we began toward the village square where the bell was still ringing. With our hut on the outskirts of Stowe and the furthest away from the village square, we were always the last to arrive.

“It’s my favourite dress.”

“You know that colour makes your hair redder, and no one likes red hair.”

I like red hair.

My mother groaned, but thankfully she didn’t comment further. It was a losing argument, and we both knew it. I adored this dress, and there was nothing my mother could say or do to change my mind. She’d already spent too many years trying and failing miserably.

Honestly, I was surprised that mother didn’t do anything to ruin this dress. But then again, if she did, she knew there would be no peace in this hut until I got another just like it. If she didn’t want me to wear my favourite dress, then she shouldn’t have sewn it for me in the first place.

One of the main reasons I loved this dress so much is because you made it for me. It's one of the few nice things you've ever given me.

"Don't think this is the end of our conversation!" She snapped at me under her breath as we joined everyone in the town square.

The chief and chiefess stood at the very centre of the makeshift wooden stage with large grins plastered on both their faces.

"That's what I feared." I groaned under my breath.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing." I was quick to deny before gesturing to the chief. "We should listen to what the chief has to say. It might be important."

My mother pursed her lips and shot me a disapproving look. Thankfully, she let it drop. For now.

"Thank you all for gathering so quickly." The chief began with a large grin. His wife wore a similar expression. "I'm sure many of you have heard the rumours going around the village these past few weeks, and I thought it was about time that I confirmed them. My nephew and his friends are travelling to Scotland where they will join the palace working as the King's guards."

"Will they be stopping here?" An excited girl asked, speaking out of turn. I snickered when her mother slapped a warning hand on her shoulder, her eyes wild with bewilderment and embarrassment over the desperation that reeked from her child.

"I was just about to get to that. Yes, they will," the chief confirmed with a chuckle. "Last I heard from my nephew, they'll be arriving the day after tomorrow, and they'll be staying with us for a couple of weeks. I know you all will do your best to make them feel welcome."

The excited grin my mother shot me told me this wouldn't be the last time I heard about the chief's nephew and his friends.

Chapter Five

The mood in the hut completely flipped once we returned home after the chief's announcement. It appeared that these guests would be more trouble than they were worth. My mother's excited grin certainly seemed to think so.

"So, I guess the rumours were true, huh?" I said as I knelt on the ground to start the fire so I could get some water boiling. There was some leftover bread that we had been eating all week, but it tasted a little stale yesterday. Some herbal tea would make it easier to swallow.

"I told you, didn't I?" My mother grinned as she handed me some leaves from her stash. My mother and I were different in every sense of the word, but we both shared our love for herbal tea.

"Yes, you did," I murmured in agreement, crushing the leaves in the pot for the tea.

"Finally, our luck is changing around here!"

"Why do you say that?" I asked curiously, glancing at her from over my shoulder where she had already begun to separate the dirty clothes into a pile.

Without a man or any money to our name, we were at the mercy of the village folk. I'm sure things would have been worse for us if the chiefess wasn't a distant relative. Instead of alienating us–the poorest of the poor in Stowe–as most other villages would have, we were given a chance to earn our living.

In exchange for food, accommodation, protection, and occasionally, a shilling if the clothes were especially precious or important, like wedding attire, we washed clothes for nearly everyone in Stowe. It was a daunting

task, and my mother and I often worked from dusk to dawn to keep up with the task load, but that was better than starving to death. And this time of year, when the season started to get warmer and young men dropped on one knee for a pretty girl in hopes of a summer wedding, was usually good business for us.

With the little money we made from these past few months alone last year, we were able to fix our roof. It had been leaking for an entire year before that, and my mother and I were often sick due to it. Thankfully, we didn't have that problem anymore.

My mother clicked her tongue in frustration. "Isn't it obvious?"

"No."

She rolled her eyes. "You must marry one of them."

"I don't think so."

"No man is going to want to marry you with that stupid expression on your face." She groaned and pursed her lips, returning my stare with a disapproving one.

"Maybe I don't want to get married."

"And end up a spinster? Not under my roof."

You're worried I'll turn into a spinster like it's a bad thing, but that's exactly what you are.

You're worried I'll turn out just like you.

I'm worried about that as well.

"I meant this year." I sighed. "Maybe I don't want to get married this year."

"Nonsense." She snorted in quick dismissal as if I was talking nonsense. "I wanted you to get married last year, but you said you weren't ready, and now you're not ready again this year? I won't be making the same mistake. You're getting married, and that's that."

"Don't I have a choice in this?"

"You can choose things like your dress and flowers. Those things you can be fussy with. But a husband? No. I'll choose a good man for you. Trust your mother, Renalia. I have your best interests at heart."

Like how you chose a good man for yourself?

"Don't you care about what I want?" I complained, pursing my lips.

"I care more about your happiness than what you want." She tutted, acting like she knew best. Like always.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“Tell me, Renalia. Do you want to end up like me?”

No. That’s what I’m afraid of the most.

I dared not answer. I didn’t trust myself not to put my foot in my mouth. The last thing I needed to do was make things worse for myself.

“I know I do a good job of hiding it, but I’m lonely, Renalia.” My mother sighed deeply, and I almost felt bad for her. Almost. “I don’t want you to end up like me. It’s not the life I would have chosen for myself. It’s not the life I want for you.”

“Friendship can combat loneliness.”

“Perhaps, to an extent but friendship can’t squash the type of loneliness that only a husband can. You’ll understand when you’re older.”

“There’s more to life than just getting married.”

“That’s wrong. And don’t let anyone catch you saying that.” She was quick to berate me. She glanced around the hut as if we risked someone eavesdropping on our conversation. “I don’t want you to end up alone and at the mercy of the village like me. People can be cruel. We’ve both already experienced that first-hand. There’s no hope left for me, but you’re still young. No one will look down their nose at you once you’re married. Especially not if you marry well.”

“You’d rather have me at the mercy of my husband?”

“Yes.” She grinned, excited at the idea of it. “Now, the chief’s nephew or one of his friends must take a liking to you, and then they must make you an offer of marriage. Do you understand that, Renalia? They must.”

“We can’t force them,” I told her.

“No, but we can make it impossible to say no.”

“How do you plan to do that?” I asked, sceptical.

“We must present you as the perfect candidate for a bride.” She explained. “You will be dressed cleanly and beautifully every day. I’ll help you with your hair, so you don’t look like a fire demon like you do most mornings. Oh, and you must stop trekking through the woods. No man wants to marry a woman he thinks is crazy.”

“I’m not crazy.”

“You have a strange obsession with the forest. If that doesn’t scream crazy, I don’t know what does.” She laughed at her own joke, but I failed to see the humour in it. “No one will marry you if they find out about that, and then I’ll be stuck with you forever.”

Is that such a bad thing?

Is living with me, your daughter, that terrible?

Instead of defending myself as I knew from experience that was a lost cause, I pointed out a small fact she may have missed. “But the chief said they’re travelling up north to work for the King of Scotland.”

“Maybe I can go with you.” She grinned, a look of pure excitement on her face. “It’ll be my one chance to escape this stupid village where everyone looks down their nose at me. It could be a new start for me. I wouldn’t have to wash clothes anymore as your husband will support us both.”

“I’m not moving to Scotland. And I don’t have a husband.”

“Yet.” She corrected me, uncaring of what I wanted. “Once one of them makes you an offer of marriage, and you accept because you will…” She sent me a pointed look. One which told me I didn’t have much, if any, say in the matter. “Then we’ll all move to Scotland.”

“And what if I don’t want to go to Scotland?”

“You don’t have a choice, Renalia.” My mother huffed, having run out of patience with me.

I opened my mouth to rebuke her claim, but she forced me quiet with a sharp, pointed glare.

The message was clear. For now, the conversation was over.

After breaking our morning fast with some stale bread and herbal tea, we got started on the washing for the day. There was a whole mixture of colours today so sorting them into piles took a little longer than usual.

My mind drifted as I worked. I so badly wanted my mother to not be serious, but I knew she was. The one thing she wanted most in the world was to get me married so I wouldn’t be her problem anymore. She had repeated those words to me over and over again while growing up, and finally, it seemed there was a real possibility of that finally happening.

As her only child and single family member, you’d think she’d be fonder of me, but unfortunately, that couldn’t be further from the truth.

She was already planning my wedding to a man that neither of us had even met yet! We didn’t even know if one of them would pick me as their future bride and life companion.

I was stubborn, but I wasn’t a match for my mother. I said I didn’t want a husband, at least not this year, but the sad truth was that I would probably be married and shipped off to Scotland with my new husband before I turned twenty at the end of summer.

The thought made me sad, but it was nothing compared to how I would feel if my mother found out what had happened last night– what I had allowed to happen. Just thinking of what I had lost–gained–last night was enough for a furious blush to take over my face, something which my mother didn't miss.

"What's got your face red like that?" She questioned, her voice dripping with disapproval. "You look like a tomato. It's nearly as red as your hair. It makes you look even worse than usual."

"Nothing." I was quick to deny and subtly angled my body so not only did a few strands of hair fall over my face to protect me from my mother's accusatory glare, but she also couldn't see me as well from this angle. And she certainly wouldn't be able to tell that I was staring into the forest, trying to pinpoint the golden eyes that I had allowed to devour me last night.

My mother would soon rather die than find out I had given my virtue away to a man that wasn't my husband.

And to a beast, no less.

Chapter Six

My mother was snoring loudly beside me. Not only did washing clothes dry out our hands and make them wrinkly–though nothing that my mother's special cream couldn't fix–but it also made us extremely tired.

With the chief's nephew and his friends set to arrive tomorrow morning, these past few days had been especially busy for us. Every girl in Stowe and their mother wanted their best dresses cleaned in time for their arrival. It appeared that my mother wasn't the only one intending to pimp out their daughter to one of the guests, much to her dismay and my pleasure.

I had to admit, I was just as curious as everyone else to see the chief's nephew for myself and the friends he was travelling with. I was curious to see what all the fuss was about.

The only thing I knew about the chief's nephew was that he was the son of the chief's older sister who married a traveller and moved further down south long before I was born. The last time I recalled her visiting was when I was a child.

When a woman got married, she was expected to move away to wherever her husband lived, leaving behind her family, home and past life. As if it never existed and her life only started after she got married.

Yet another thing I didn't appreciate about the marriage convention.

I had absolutely nothing against the sanctity of marriage. I looked forward to getting married and starting a family of my own one day, but I didn't wish for that day to be tomorrow. Or anytime within the next year, for that matter. My biggest problem with marrying the chief's nephew or

one of his friends was that within the first few weeks of our marriage, I would be forced to leave everything I knew behind and move to Scotland with him.

Overlooking my apprehensions, I couldn't deny that I was curious about the chief's nephew and his friends. How long had they been travelling? How long would they be travelling for? Would they stop anywhere else on their way to Scotland? How did they get a job working for the King? How long would this job last? Were they even looking to take wives?

Oh, how I would love to see the country! But on my terms, and with the possibility of being able to return to the one place I had ever called home.

It was too bad that my mother didn't see it the same way.

Speaking of my mother, she somehow found a way to give me a difficult time even when she was asleep. I groaned in frustration when her snoring grew louder with each passing second, making it impossible for me to get any sleep.

I squeezed my eyes shut and counted all the clothes waiting for me to wash tomorrow. When I got to twenty and didn't feel the least bit drowsy, I huffed and sat up. I wrapped my arms around myself as I ventured outside of the hut. She would have my head if she knew that I was going for a walk at this time of night, especially after she had all but forbade me from venturing to the forest ever again.

With nothing but the cold, late winter air, the darkness of the beautiful night and the distant temptation of the forest to keep me company, I felt so much more relaxed already.

"My mother would love this too if she listened to me for a change." I exhaled in bliss and rubbed my hands along my arms, trying to warm myself up. If I didn't worry about waking my mother up, I would have snuck back into the hut to grab a blanket or a scarf.

Before I could allow the thought to tempt me, something else demanded my attention.

My breath hitched in my throat when I caught sight of a familiar pair of golden eyes twinkling from deep within the forest, following my every move. They shone brightly through the darkness, and I couldn't tear my gaze away. The rich gold was too enchanting.

I knew that I should be afraid, that he–if you could even describe Beast as a *he* as there was nothing human about him–was nothing short of an abomination, but I couldn't bring myself to be afraid. Beast had spouted fur in front of my very eyes and transformed into this wolf-like creature. I should be afraid of him, but I could barely get my mind off him these past few days. The glint in his eyes told me that I was all he could think about, too.

The feeling was indescribable, and I could feel him beckoning me into the forest. To him.

I knew it was wrong. I knew I should turn around while I still had the chance, but I couldn't fight the temptation. It was as if my legs had a mind of their own as I began walking toward him.

"What are you doing, Renalia? Mother is right. Venturing out to the forest in the middle of the night is something a crazy person would do!" I whispered under my breath as I trudged forward, those golden eyes a bright beacon in the darkness that guided me toward him.

Despite my harsh whispers of berating myself, it wasn't enough to turn me around. Instead, I kept my head down, tucked my chin into my chest, and pushed myself to walk faster into the forest.

The golden eyes only glowed darker the closer I got. Blinking, and watching me carefully.

I moved to the left. They followed me.

I moved to the right. They followed me.

Wherever I went, or whatever direction I moved in, the golden, beady eyes followed me. I was pretty sure that if I were to turn around and head back toward the hut, Beast would venture out of the forest to catch me, and I would love every single moment of it.

My mother spoke about making me so irresistible that one of the travellers would take me as his wife and whisk me away to Scotland. If she truly wanted to learn the meaning of the word *irresistible*, then she needed to take a few pointers from Beast. Of course, then I'd have to explain where I knew him from, and I could never do that. Not without signing my life away. And his.

I understood and was appreciative that a woman's virginity was sacred, but the double standards between men and women were atrocious. Men could go around sleeping with as many fair maidens as they wished before marriage, but women were expected to remain chaste and pure. It was

unfair and unjust, but unfortunately, I was just one person, and no one paid attention to a woman. Especially one as poor and unimportant as me.

Personally, despite my dislike of the double standard, I liked the idea of saving myself for my husband and hoped that he would do the same for me. Now, I would have nothing to offer him. No money, no family, and now, not my virginity either. And all because I had allowed my hormones to take over me and spread my legs for Beast.

The worst part was that I didn't regret it. Not a single moment of it.

Going to see him again was a mistake. I just knew it was. That was what my mind was telling me, but my heart wouldn't listen. My heart was pushing me forward, forcing me to close the distance between us.

What did the forest hold for me? Would I walk in to find a human waiting for me or a creature? Would his touch be gentle just like the other night, or would his claws scratch me?

Was I looking for a repeat of the other night?

I gulped and nodded to myself. My mind told me it was wrong, but my heart only beat faster as I knew for a fact that I definitely wanted a repeat of the other night.

Did Beast want the same? Had he been thinking of me every passing second these past few days like I had been thinking of him?

Would he finally have some answers to my questions?

"Beast?" I called out to him in a whisper as I entered the forest, having lost sight of his mesmerising eyes. "Beast? Where are you?"

There was no longer anything gold and magnificent twinkling in the distance. Instead, there was only the darkest type of darkness I had ever encountered, and I could only make out the things around me when I squinted. I had never explored the forest this late at night.

In all my haste to locate Beast, I almost tripped over my feet as I twirled around. A surprised gasp escaped me as I feared falling on my face, but instead, I landed on something soft and hard at the same time. My fingers dug into his fur, clutching hard as I tried my best not to graze my knees on the harsh forest floor.

Beast.

Instead of cowering away in fear and running back to the hut like my mind was telling me to do, I loosened my grip and did all I could to hold in the moan from escaping at just how soft his fur was. It was richer, thicker, and softer than any fur blanket I had ever washed.

“Thank you,” I whispered with a furious blush and pushed myself off him.

When I pulled away, I squeezed my hand into a fist, remembering how soft his fur had been under my palm and between my fingers.

Instead of turning back into his human like the other day, like I expected him to do, Beast approached me with small, cautious steps. His golden eyes remained trained on mine the entire time, as if unsure of how I would react. Whether I would run or stay.

Little did he know that he didn’t have anything to worry about.

The last time, I was terrified when I watched him transform in front of me, but this time was different. This time, I couldn’t wait. I wanted to see him transform into his human again. I couldn’t wait.

Except, it never happened.

Instead of transforming into his human form–if you could even call it that–Beast dropped himself to the ground on his stomach. When he reared his head, gently nipping at my fingertips, I put two and two together.

My legs quivered slightly as I threw one of them over him. I spread my legs wide to sit atop him. Wider than when Beast was between them a a few days ago.

In warning, Beast turned his head and nipped at my bare feet. I didn’t know what he meant exactly, but the moment he rose to his paws and began off in a gentle gallop, I leaned forward and buried my face in the fur at his neck. My fingers curled around his fur, and I held on for my dear life as he got faster and faster, zipping through the forest.

I wasn’t sure where we were going or how long this ride would be, but it was the freest I had ever felt before in my life.

Correction. The freest I had ever felt was when I mustered up the courage to slowly lift my face from his neck. To watch the way everything blurred into the background as Beast took me with him on a wild adventure.

Beast eventually came to a stop at a clearing with a flowing stream, thin and narrow but perfect for dipping my feet into. Once I slipped off his back, I did just that. A shiver ran down my back at the first sudden touch of the cool water, but my body all but melted into the second dip.

With the way I had been enjoying the wild ride on Beast’s back, I hadn’t paid attention to where he was taking me. One thing I knew, however, was that it was the deepest I had ever been in the forest, and I

certainly didn’t know how to get out of it from there. Yet, here I was, completely at ease.

How could I be not at ease when I felt safer in this one moment than all the other moments in my life added together?

A moment later, a large figure sat down next to me on the riverbank, taking my lead and dipping his feet into the water as well.

Chapter Seven

"I've been thinking about you," I murmured, refusing to shy away from my feelings even if they confused me. What was even more confusing was that I had never felt this way about anyone before. Perhaps because I had never met someone like Beast before.

Being under the scrutiny of Beast's golden eyes was electrifying, and it took all I could do not to shiver as his gaze travelled up and down my body.

"Beast too." He whispered, subtly turning his body toward mine. The action was small, and I would have missed it if I wasn't paying attention. We were close but not as close as the other day. My cheeks flamed furiously at the rogue thought, giving me away.

Before my mind could delve any deeper into the gutter, I cleared my throat and turned my attention back to the stream of water.

"I love the water," I murmured, inching a little forward so I could hang my legs even more over the edge and swing them better.

"Water?" Beast questioned in a low murmur.

I nodded and threw him a grin. "If I could, I would live near the water and go for a swim every morning."

"We…move?" He suggested, the determined look on his face telling me that if I so much as nodded my head, he would immediately find us somewhere to live near the ocean.

"No, we can't." I laughed and reached out for his arm.

The action was absentminded, and I didn't think much of it, but the moment my hand touched his skin, I felt like I had been burned. Not the

kind of burn that made me want to recoil and immediately nurse my hand, but the kind where I wanted to lean into the fire and embrace it.

“We can’t move,” I murmured after a few moments. “My mother is here.”

“She…come?”

“I don’t think she’ll like that.” I chuckled nervously, purposely teetering around the edge of the truth where my mother would soon rather die than find out that I had sex with a man that wasn’t my husband. Let alone one that wasn’t even human.

“Why?” Beast asked curiously, cocking his head to the side as he studied me.

“I don’t know.” My lips quirked up into a small smile. “Ideally, I’d love to live somewhere close to both the water and a forest. There’s just something so free about that. I could go for a swim, or a walk in the forest whenever I wanted. That’s all I want from life. Freedom.”

“Beast like forest.” Beast smiled lopsidedly at me, his eyes zeroing where my hand was still on his arm. I didn’t move it away, and neither did he.

“I like the forest, too.”

“What else you…like?” He asked, his dark brows furrowing together in the middle as he struggled over his words. Watching the peculiar look of concentration wash over his face made me want to reach out and smooth over the line there, to get rid of it and put a smile on his face instead.

“I like bread and herbal tea. I especially like mint tea, but we can’t afford it nearly as much as we’d like, so it’s a treat for us when we can. I also love this emerald green dress that I have. It’s pretty simple. Nothing like the pretty dresses the other girls in Stowe have, but I love the way it feels and looks on me. My mother doesn’t like it much. She says it makes my hair look redder than it is, but she doesn’t like many things. Especially when it comes to me.” My smile dimmed when I realised that I had been talking Beast’s ear off, but he didn’t seem to mind in the least. “Sorry.” I was quick to apologise, an embarrassed look taking over my face. “I didn’t mean to talk your ear off. My mother says I do it all the time, but I don’t think I talk all that much. I guess it feels like more if it’s just me and her most of the time.”

Beast’s eyes were trained on my mouth the entire time I spoke, intently watching its every movement.

“Beast like.”

“You like listening to me talk?” I asked, the nervous, self-deprecating part of me needing the assurance that I wasn’t just embarrassing myself with my non-stop talking. Perhaps my mother was more correct than I gave her credit for.

Beast nodded, the intensity of his stare not dipping for even a moment. I was surprised by how comforting it was. How it didn’t bother me or make me feel uncomfortable.

“Are you sure?” I asked, gnawing on my bottom lip nervously. “My mother and even some of the women from the village always say that girls who talk too much will struggle to get a husband.”

“Beast like…listening…pretty flower…talk.”

That was the longest sentence he had been able to string along since I had met him, and I was proud. It wasn’t the most advanced, and there was still much room for improvement, but I was so proud.

“Thank you.” I grinned and turned my head, allowing my hair to fall and cover the deep flush that stained my cheeks.

“Beast…watch you.”

“What?” I asked, caught off guard by his sudden confession.

“Sometimes…Beast watch…pretty flower.” Beast repeated the admission, focused and his face a mask of concentration as he struggled with the words to express himself.

“From the forest?” I questioned, more curious than anything else.

Instead of feeling weirded out by his confession that Beast had been watching me from the forest these past few days, I felt a warm, fuzzy feeling settle in my stomach. It was oddly comforting.

“I thought I could feel someone watching me at times,” I said with a small smile, swinging my legs back and forth. “What have you seen so far?”

“You and…woman.” He told me.

“You must be talking of my mother,” I replied, wincing at the possibilities of all the awkward, embarrassing moments from the past few days between my mother and me that Beast could have possibly witnessed.

“Mother…bad?” Beast frowned, a nondescript expression on his face.

“My mother isn’t necessarily a bad woman.” I sighed, my lips tugging down at the corners to match his frown. “I don’t think she means to be so mean all the time, but that’s just who she is, I guess.”

His frown deepened. “Mother bad…by accident?”

“Something like that. She doesn’t mean to be bad. It’s just that she has a way of making everything she says sound rude and condescending. Especially when it comes to me. Or maybe that’s because we spend so much time together.”

“She make you…feel bad?”

“Sometimes,” I admitted with a sigh. “With her words.”

“Mother bad,” Beast stated with the utmost conviction, looking as if he had made his mind up. A part of me knew that he was right.

All of me knew that he was right.

“Enough about my mother. What about you?” I cleared my throat and turned to face him. “What is your family like?”

“No family,” Beast shook his head.

“Everyone has a family.”

“Beast…no family.” His face was neutral as he spoke, as if unbothered by the prospect of having no family.

“I’m sorry.” I apologised, fighting the overwhelming urge to wrap my arms around him. To hold him close to my chest and brush my fingers through his hair in hopes of making him feel better.

“Have you always been like this?” I whispered the question cautiously. I wasn’t worried that Beast would hurt me. I was more concerned that I would hurt him with my probing.

Beast offered me the smallest of nods.

“Were you born like this? Or have you been completely human at some point?”

“Beast…born.” I think he was trying to tell me that he was born like this. “Never human.”

My lips tugged down at the corners at the dark look on his face, but I wasn’t scared of him. Not even for a moment.

“What about your mother?”

“No mother. No remember.” He shrugged, finally dropping my eyes, and I knew I needed to drop the questioning. He clearly didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

“I’m sorry, Beast.” I apologised and leaned over to rest my head on his shoulder.

A comfortable blanket of silence fell over us. With the darkness surrounding us and the cold water sloshing over our ankles, it was nice.

Really nice.

It was the most peaceful moment of my life, but I wasn't looking for peace. Not with Beast.

Turning my head, I closed my eyes and leaned forward until my lips pressed against his in a gentle, chaste kiss.

Chapter Eight

A tired groan escaped me as I squeezed my eyes shut, desperate for a few more moments of sleep before I was forced to wake up and wash clothes all day like I did every day. My attempt always proved pointless, but not today, apparently.

There was no mother here today. There was only Beast and me.

A startled gasp escaped me as I pushed myself off Beast's chest, suddenly realising that we had fallen asleep by the stream. With his arms wound tightly around my waist, holding onto me for dear life, it was a struggle to leave. It didn't help that I wanted to stay and was only half-heartedly trying to escape.

Staring down at Beast, he looked the epitome of serene. His eyebrows weren't furrowed together for once as he wasn't currently trying to understand and decipher me. He wasn't staring intently at me like he was worried that if he glanced away for a single moment, I would vanish into thin air. For the first time since I had known him–not that I knew him all that well–he looked more human than beast.

Any other night, I would have been too scared to sleep in the open forest like this, but not when I was with Beast, it appeared.

And then everything from last night came rushing back to me.

As much as I wanted for things to go further between us, the most we had done was kiss chastely before falling asleep in each other's arms. I wasn't necessarily disappointed, but I couldn't deny that I hoped we would have a repeat of the other night. My pussy definitely ached for it. Especially with him so near.

Who knew a man named Beast could ravage me like a wild animal, and make me feel like the most special gem in the world at the same time?

And who knew he would be such a good listener?

Even when we were both on the verge of drifting asleep last night, I had been talking his ear off. While I kept talking and talking, Beast played with my hair, stroking and patting it like it was the softest material in the world. When I couldn't feel my feet after being dipped in the cold stream for so long, he insisted to rub them until they were warm. It was a little embarrassing at first, but Beast didn't seem the least bit fazed or bothered.

Nothing seemed to faze Beast, and that was something I was quickly learning I really liked about him.

My cheeks warmed as I thought of the way he looked at me. Like I was the most precious thing in the world and he was too enchanted to look away.

No one had ever looked at me like that, especially not someone of the opposite sex. Usually, the only interaction I had with the opposite sex was when they needed me to get a stain out of their clothes before either their mother or wife noticed and berated them for being so careless.

But Beast wasn't like that. Beast didn't need me to wash his clothes. Beast didn't need anything from me.

He just wanted me for me.

Beast made me feel special in a way I had never felt before. He made me feel things, and want to do things my mother always told me only happened between a husband and his wife. But Beast and I weren't married, and he was certainly more animal than man, but that didn't change how I felt about him.

Did he even understand the concept of marriage? Was he even interested in marrying me? Was he interested in getting married at all?

All the unanswered questions and thoughts swirling in my mind quickly overwhelmed me. I couldn't possibly deal with them this early in the morning without my herbal tea to fully wake me up.

I shook my head and returned my attention to the man underneath me, holding on so tight that it felt like he didn't ever plan on letting go.

I liked that. I liked that a lot.

My breath hitched in my throat as I shifted on top of him and felt just how much Beast liked me. When my pussy landed on his bare cock that was harder than it ought to be for a man who was still asleep, I stilled.

Even through the material of my night dress, I could feel every pulsing vein in his cock and the longer I remained on top of him, the more my greedy pussy clenched with wanton need for him.

I don't know how it escaped my attention last night–perhaps because it was dark and Beast was a fantastic listener–but Beast had been completely and utterly naked. Just as he was now. Except, I hadn't felt his cock–which seemed to have a mind of its own as it prodded repeatedly against my sex with each deep inhale and exhale while he slept–against my most intimate parts.

If I so much as lifted the skirt of my dress and shifted forward on top of him, I would no doubt have myself a repeat of the immeasurable pleasures from the other night. The notion was very tempting, especially when I was confident that he wouldn't mind in the slightest, but I couldn't do that. I couldn't act so wanton and desperate. At least not this early into knowing him.

I couldn't be thinking like that. Not when Beast was fast asleep and completely unaware of the dirty gutter that my mind seemed to permanently reside in whenever I thought of him.

My eyes widened as I once again realised that we were still out by the stream. We had slept in the forest and were still out by the stream this morning instead of sleeping beside my mother like I should have been.

A flash of fear struck me, giving me the strength I needed to escape Beast's safe, protective arms. I immediately felt cold and wanted to crawl back into them, but the thought of my mother's furious expression was enough to send a fearful shiver down my spine.

Beast was still fast asleep and snoring lightly when I finally managed to wriggle out of his arms. Unable to resist, I dipped down and pressed my lips against his in a soft, good morning kiss. Our usual rough, dirty, and sinful kisses would just have to wait. Right now, I needed to return to the hut before my mother woke up and killed me for disobeying her orders once again.

With the skirt of my dress flying around my knees and absolutely no sense of direction this far into the forest, it felt like I had been running for ages.

Damn Beast for venturing this far into the forest!

And damn me for being enthralled at the empowering feeling of riding him and not paying attention to where we were going!

After a while, my surroundings started to get more familiar. Pushing myself to reach home before my mother woke up, I broke out of the forest and immediately ran into someone. Like the last time when I had run into someone–or rather, something–I fell flat on my ass.

“Sorry, I didn’t see you there.” A masculine voice chuckled, followed quickly by a hand thrust in my disoriented line of vision to help me up. “You were running quite fast there. Are you okay? Hope you’re not running from something.”

“I’m okay. Sorry for running into you and no, I’m not running from anything,” I was quick to apologise as I forwent his hand and scrambled up to my feet, pausing briefly to brush the dirt off my nightdress. If my mother noticed the flecks of dirt on me, she would know that I had been in the forest when she specifically ordered me not to go there again.

“Excuse me! What’s your name?” The man called after me, but I didn’t have time to converse. Not when my life was literally at risk.

My mind dwelled briefly on the foreign man I had run into as I ran back to the hut. I had never seen him before, and he was standing outside the forest where villagers scarcely frequented. It was strange, but I was quick to dismiss the thoughts. I could question his motives for being there later if I managed to survive my mother’s wrath this morning.

With literal moments to spare, I all but threw my body the rest of the distance and onto the bed. A muffled groan escaped me, and I winced as I landed painfully on my side. I closed my eyes and evened out my breathing just as my mother yawned and opened her eyes.

“Wake up, sleeping beauty.” She scoffed as she got up beside me, not the least bit aware or even suspicious that I had spent the night in the forest with a creature that couldn’t be further from a human. “We’ve got a lot of clothes to wash today, so get started on breakfast. I need my tea.”

Chapter Nine

"Come here, Renalia." My mother ordered with a deep frown on her face. "Let me fix your hair. Maybe then it wouldn't look like such a bird's nest."

"My hair does not look like a bird's nest." I protested her claim but nonetheless, moved over to do as she asked. She was especially irritable this morning, and I knew better than to defy her.

"It does, and we both know it." She huffed. "Before we leave, make sure you put on some of my special lotion."

"I get to use your special lotion?" I shot her a surprised look over my shoulder.

"Yes. This is a special occasion." My mother grinned, a rarity for her. "It's not every day that you meet your future husband for the first time."

I was tempted to correct her–to tell her there wasn't any guarantee that I would be meeting anyone new or special today, let alone my future husband–but I chose to bite my tongue. After all, my mother hardly allowed me to use her special lotion that she, too, only used on special occasions. It was sweet and floral with a rich, earthy undertone and associated with every good memory I had growing up.

"And where do you think you're going?" My mother called after me, her disapproving tone quick to return once she pinned my hair into a neat bun.

"I'm going to get your special lotion," I said, worried that she had already changed her mind.

"You need to get dressed first."

“I am dressed,” I frowned in confusion and glanced down at my dress. It was my favourite one, green and simple; comfortable.

“You might be wearing clothes, but you’re certainly not dressed to meet your future husband right now.” She clicked her tongue in disapproval before moving to get something from the rack of clean clothes.

I’ve already met my future husband, and he’s seen me in far less. He’s seen me in absolutely nothing and likes me just fine.

“I’ve been working on this dress for weeks now.” She said, lost somewhere between the rails. “I knew this year was going to be our year, so I had to be prepared.”

Our year?

More like your *year since you can’t wait to get rid of me.*

“I haven’t noticed you stitching a new dress.” I frowned, my voice trailing off in question.

“That’s because I’ve been doing it when you’ve either not been home or asleep.”

“Why?”

“Why?” My mother scoffed as she emerged with her hands behind her. I could see a deep shade of green material spilling out from the sides, not completely hidden behind her, and the pop of colour was more than enough for an overwhelming wave of excitement to consume me. “Because I knew you wouldn’t approve of my motives behind it, and frankly, I had no intention, and still don’t, to receive a telling off from my daughter for trying to do something good for her. You’re ungrateful by nature, Renalia, and I really hate that about you sometimes.”

Can’t you do something nice for me without coupling it with an insult?

“Green?” I grinned, excited.

“I’m not a fan of it, but I know it’s your favourite colour.” She shrugged and removed her hands from behind her back, finally revealing the dress to me.

The dress was a deep emerald green, a shade or two darker than my favourite everyday dress. The top part was tight like a corset, and would no doubt hug my upper body to accentuate my waist before flowing to my ankles like a silky green waterfall. The sleeves were shorter than what I was used to and would only cover the tops of my shoulders, giving the illusion of a sweetheart neckline. There were tiny red flowers sewn into

the low neckline and waist of the dress, designed to frame my assets perfectly.

I had never seen a dress more stunning before.

How could something so beautiful come from someone so cruel?

“I don’t know what to say,” I whispered.

“Do you like it?” The question dripped with an excited eagerness.

“I love it!”

“Then say thank you and get dressed.” My mother ordered with a laugh and pushed the dress into my awaiting arms.

“Thank you.” I all but squealed and rushed to pull her in for a tight hug. Before she could complain, I zipped out of her arms and began stripping off what was formerly known as my favourite dress to get changed into what was now my favourite dress.

“If this dress doesn’t get you a husband, I don’t know what will.” My mother pulled on some strings to strap me into the dress. “I spent hours slaving away on this dress, so you owe me good behaviour today, okay? Keep an open mind, and don’t forget the plan. You need a husband, Renalia. You haven’t got much time left now.”

I nodded but bit my tongue, not trusting myself not to say something that wouldn’t ruin the moment.

Once my mother deemed that I looked as best as I could, we left the hut and joined everyone at the border of Stowe.

We headed toward the village square, but quickly changed routes when we spotted Jane and her mother walking past.

“Where are you going?” I asked Jane, happily ditching my mother for a friend. “I thought we were supposed to gather in the village square.”

“There’s been a change of plans. Everyone is waiting at the border for them to arrive.” Jane told me with a bright smile, looking just as excited and eager as my mother. “You look beautiful, Renalia. Is that a new dress?”

“It is, thank you, Jane,” I replied politely, a warm flush spreading over my cheeks. I rarely got compliments from anyone. Why would I when I was only noticed when people needed their clothes washed? “You look very beautiful, too.” I complimented her and the stunning white gown that she was wearing. It almost looked like a wedding dress.

Jane was what I envisioned what an ideal girl looked like. Her hair was gold like honey and dropped in natural curls to her waist. She always had a

beautiful, warm flush on her cheeks, only drawing more attention to how perfect her heart-shaped face and ocean-blue eyes were. She wasn't as thin as me–probably because she wasn't on the border of being malnourished–and had beautiful curves that filled out the stunning dress she wore.

"Is your mother trying to get you married to one of the travellers like mine is?" Jane exhaled as we arrived at the border and joined what looked like the entire village.

"Yes."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm excited to meet some of these travellers because Lord knows the men in this village are so stupid and annoying, but it's a lot of pressure."

"Tell me about it." I agreed with a groan. "My mother is absolutely obsessed with the idea of getting me married to one of them. It's all she can talk about."

"I doubt she's as bad as my mother." She sighed and glanced around. "There's everyone else. Let's join them." She gestured to the group of girls our age standing to the side. "Oh, Charlotte's with them, too." A groan escaped her, followed by an exaggerated roll of her eyes.

When I followed her gaze and confirmed her words, I reacted the same way.

Charlotte got married last year and had become insufferable to be around ever since. All she could talk about whenever we saw her was her husband this and her husband that. The way she spoke about him, you'd think he wasn't her second cousin from her mother's side, and they hadn't been set to marry each other since their early childhoods.

"Jane. Renalia. It's good to see you both." Charlotte grinned, pausing her anecdote to smile brightly at us. "I was just telling everyone about the beautiful dress my husband bought me specifically for today. He said he wanted to make a good impression as we expect to invite the chief's nephew and his friends over for dinner sometime during their stay."

"That's nice." I smiled politely, struggling to keep it from morphing into a grimace.

"Nice?" Charlotte snorted and laughed at me. "Oh, dear Renalia. You'll realise that the gesture is more than just nice once you are married and have a husband of your own. You'll see then that such a gesture is romantic and very, very sweet of my husband. He's noticed how hard I've been working lately to maintain our hut. Oh! Between maintaining our hut

and my husband, there's no time in the day for anything else! I don't know how I'm going to manage–"

"Oh, hush, Charlotte!" Jane pressed her fingers to her lips to shut up our married friend. "You're already married. Let us unmarried girls fantasise over our future husbands in peace. We're all already so jealous of you without your boring stories."

"How rude!" Charlotte huffed and left to return to her husband, leaving us all in a laughing fit.

"That was rather improper." Tana snickered, flicking her dark hair over her shoulder. "Though I must thank you. She was really starting to bore me with the constant talk of her husband. You'd think she would run out of things to say about him, but apparently not. It's a new boring story every time."

"Forget her husband." Jane snorted. "Samuel was never a catch, and we all know it. There certainly wasn't a single one of us distressed when he dropped down on one knee for her to appease their parents."

"If my mother were with us, she would have said this was highly improper and that you would never be able to get a husband with that mouth, Jane." Milly laughed. "Of course, then she'd go on to say that none of us will get a husband either for encouraging your improper speech with our laughter."

"My parents are determined that I must marry one of these travellers." Tana pitched in, not sounding as disgruntled as Jane and I were.

"My parents are the same," Milly said. "Though I have to admit, I'm rather excited to see them. If they're handsome, I wouldn't mind catching their eye."

"Then you'd have to go up to live in Scotland with him for the rest of your life," I told her and listened in surprise as my friends seemed rather excited at the possibility.

What sounded like my worst nightmare couldn't be more exciting for them.

I listened as my friends fantasised about the men, all of us waiting impatiently for them to arrive. We had heard some rumours of what the chief's nephew looked like, handsome, well-built and tall, but frankly, I couldn't imagine him holding a candlelight to Beast.

As if he knew that I was thinking about him, I felt a pair of familiar golden eyes boring into the back of my head.

Chapter Ten

The reminder that I had left Beast asleep in the forest earlier this morning played at the back of my mind. Even though I suspected he would be annoyed to wake up alone, there simply wasn't anything I could do. If my mother awoke to find me missing this morning, I would be in some seriously boiling water.

Hence, the warmth of his protective gaze surprised me.

I knew it wasn't possible, but I wished he could be here with me right now. Human or beast form, it didn't matter. I just wanted him by my side, gently playing with my hair like he had done last night.

Of course, that would be far too scandalous for the people of Stowe.

"What are you all doing waiting out here?" A loud, booming voice sounded from behind us all, demanding our attention. "Don't you want to greet our guests?"

My eyebrows furrowed together in surprise and like everyone else, turned to follow the chief's voice to find that he wasn't alone.

Next to the chief was his wife, the chiefess. On his other side stood three men I had never seen before.

Well, two of them I had never seen before.

It took me a while to figure out where I knew the third man from, but I eventually realised why he looked so familiar. My cheeks flamed at the memory of running into him this morning when I had been scrambling to get back to the hut before my mother woke up.

My eyes widened to the point of worry, and I glanced away from him before I could catch his attention.

Would he recognise me? What if he had told the chief that I ran into him this morning?

Or worse, what if he told my mother?

A small gasp escaped me at the thought, and I shook my head when Jane sent me a curious look.

I didn't know how I would save myself if this stranger decided to give me up.

I felt another pair of eyes on me and this time, it wasn't Beast. I knew who it was without even glancing up. When I finally gathered the courage to glance up, I was met with a pair of deep blue eyes, and a bright smile from the familiar stranger. One of the chief's guests.

It was silly of me to think that he wouldn't recognise me.

"What's going on here, chief?" A villager asked.

"I thought I'd surprise you all." The chief chuckled with a bright smile of his own. "My nephew and his friends actually arrived last night. They've decided to stay here for four weeks before they continue their travels to Scotland to work for the King. To celebrate, we'll be having a village feast this evening! My nephew, Luke, and his friends, Dean and Tristian, have offered to help us hunt some deer for everyone. Isn't that wonderful news?"

"The one on the right is *such* a dreamboat!" Jane gushed as soon as the chief finished with his announcement. "His dark hair and eyes make him look so mysterious. My mother certainly won't approve but she's the one who wanted me to catch the eye of one of these gentlemen, so she'll just have to live with my choice." She giggled and bounced giddily on her feet.

"I like the one in the middle," Tana murmured in a shy voice, her eyes lingering on the space around him and not on him specifically. "He's kind of handsome."

"I like the chief's nephew." Milly giggled, gnawing on her bottom lip as she twirled a strand of hair around her finger. "I think he likes me, too. He keeps looking over here."

When I glanced over my shoulder, I locked eyes with none other than the chief's nephew–Luke. The same man that I had run into this morning. He smiled softly at me, but I couldn't return it. I turned sharply to look away from him and hoped none of the girls noticed the strange exchange.

"I don't like any of them." I shook my head, already knowing that my mother would be disappointed.

“Really?” Jane asked, playfully wiggling her eyebrows at me. “Not any of them? Not even Tristian? Have you seen how *dreamy* he is?”

“I agree that he’s very handsome, but I’m not interested in getting married to him.” I laughed. “He’s all yours, Jane.”

“I’m going to try and make him mine.” She beamed. “The less competition, the better.”

“You really don’t like any of them?” Charlotte’s voice suddenly sounded as she rejoined us. Her eyes were narrowed in suspicion as she watched me carefully.

“No.” I denied with a simple shake of my head.

“Then, why does Luke, the chief’s nephew keep looking at you?” She sent me a pointed look, a sharp pinch about her face as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“How is Renalia supposed to know the answer to that?” Tana asked, but Charlotte ignored her.

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “Why don’t you go ask him?”

“I don’t think Luke was looking at Renalia.” Milly frowned, starting to look visibly upset. “I think he’s been looking at me. I’ve already caught his eyes a few times.”

“No, Milly. He’s definitely not been looking at you. I’m sure of it.” Charlotte sneered at her. “I’ve been watching him. He’s been looking at Renalia, and she’s been looking back at him.”

“I have not.” I was quick to deny it, but Charlotte didn’t look like she believed me, and Milly already looked hurt. “I’m really not interested in him, Milly.” I tried to assure her. “You can have him if you want.”

“He’s not yours to give.” Milly snorted. Before I could say anything, she shot me a dark look, turned around and sauntered away.

“Well done, Charlotte.” Jane groaned. “Look what you’ve done.”

“I haven’t done anything.” The perpetrator defended herself, blinking innocently at us all even though we all knew she was guilty. “I just thought I’d correct Renalia since she was clearly lying.”

“I’m not lying.” I groaned, starting to get tired of having to repeatedly defend myself.

I wasn’t interested in Luke, or anyone else, for that matter. I was only interested in Beast, but I couldn’t very well tell people that. Not even my friends.

“Don’t worry about her,” Jane reached out to place a reassuring hand on my arm, giving it a gentle squeeze. “She’s just jealous.”

“Yes, Renalia.” Tana agreed in a small voice. “It’s not your fault that Luke has taken a liking to you.”

I wanted to assure them that Milly, as well as the other girls, didn’t have anything to worry about as I wasn’t interested in any of the guests. Even if I was, it still shouldn’t matter as I was nothing but part of the lowly mother-daughter duo who washed everyone’s clothes to put food in our stomachs every day. Why would any man choose me when they could literally have anyone better by picking one of the other girls?

Instead, I offered them both a small smile in thanks.

We moved to join everyone as they headed toward the village square. If we were going to be having a special feast today for all of Stowe, then that meant there was a lot of work to be done. Especially for my mother and me as we sat at the bottom of the ladder.

As we walked past Milly and some other girls as they entertained our guests for the next four weeks, I couldn’t help but catch Luke’s eye. It was unintentional and unwelcome, even more so when he smirked at me as I passed. I turned my head sharply to look away, but the damage had already been done.

As much as I wished it wasn’t the case, it appeared that Luke would be somewhat of a problem for me.

Chapter Eleven

Thankfully I had changed out of the dress my mother had sewn for me especially for today before I started working because I don't think I had ever looked worse than I did right now. Not only was the bottom of my dress soaked with some soapy water that had sloshed over the side of the tub, but there was also a patch of deer blood soaked into the arms and something sticky on the skirt.

We had finished gutting the animals the men had caught for the feast, and all that was left to do was cook everything, but I was already pooped.

"Renalia, come here." My mother called out to me.

"Yes, mother," I answered, wiping my hands dry on a clean dishcloth.

"The chiefess has asked me to wash a dress for her for tonight."

"Is there enough time for it to dry?"

"There's only a small patch that needs washing, so it shouldn't be a problem, but that isn't why I called you over here." She told me, moving to the side to make room for me next to her in front of the open fire some men had helped get started for us. With that and all the meat they had hunted today, their work was done for the day and they were currently gathered in the village square, getting to know the travellers better over some ale and crackers while we prepared the feast.

"Why did you call me over here?"

"If you'd let me finish my sentence, then you'd have the answer to that question already." My mother snapped at me with a disapproving scowl. "I need you to take over cooking the deer for me."

"Me?" I echoed in surprise. "But I've never cooked deer before. I wouldn't know what to do with it."

If I mess it up, you'll scream at me in front of the entire village.

"Oh, don't fret." She waved a dismissive hand in the air as she rose to her feet, moving to replace herself with me on the stool. "I've already done most of the work. I just need you to watch the meat and turn the stick every now and again to prevent it from burning."

"And if it burns?" I dared to ask with a gulp.

"Then we won't have enough deer for everyone." My mother narrowed her eyes at me, the silent warning far scarier and binding than a vocal one would have been. "And I'll make sure everyone knows to fault you for it."

I gulped and nodded obediently.

"And make sure to change out of that dress before the feast begins. You look horrendous right now. Try to stay away from the men because no one will want to marry you when you look like that."

I've been slaving away all day, helping prep all the meat for tonight. I'm not going to smell like roses, am I?

With the fear of failure monopolising me, I sat on the stool and stared at the large deer on the skewer, not daring to glance away from it for even a moment. Not even when Jane dropped herself on the stool next to me. It was far from the only animal being cooked for tonight's feast, but it didn't take the pressure off me in the slightest.

"No offence, but your mother is a little mean."

"You saw that, huh?" I chuckled nervously, reaching out to turn the stick. The side didn't look fully cooked yet and looked like it could do with a deeper shade of brown painted on, but it was better than having it burnt and inedible.

"I'm sorry she's like that."

"I'm sorry she's like that as well, but she mostly means well." I shrugged.

"Who means well?" Tana asked as she and Milly joined us.

"No one." Jane shrugged nonchalantly which I was grateful for. When the others weren't paying attention, she sent me a reassuring look. People could make their opinions of my mother all they wanted but Jane's lips were sealed.

It would be difficult to defend my mother when she never missed an opportunity to berate me, in public or in private.

"I spoke to Tristian earlier." Jane grinned, skilfully changing the subject.

“You did?” I echoed in surprise. “What did you two talk about?”

“I told him I thought he looked dreamy.” Her lips quirked high at the corners, followed closely by a light flush which made her look all that more beautiful than she already was.

I didn’t look like any of the other girls. Jane was tall and beautiful with her long blonde hair and sweetheart face. Milly and Tana were equally as beautiful with their dark hair and dark eyes. Tana was a little shorter and curvier than Milly who was one of the tallest girls in Stowe. They all had some healthy colour to their skin from spending time in the sun and having proper nourishment while I, on the other hand, was petite and pale, making my hair look even fierier. With my mother the same, we definitely stood out like sore thumbs. As if we didn’t have enough working against us as it was.

“What’s got you thinking so hard, Renalia?” Milly called out to me, her curt voice snapping me out of my daze.

“Were you thinking about Luke?” Tana teased.

“Why would she be thinking about Luke?” Milly snapped at her before returning her attention to me. “Why are you thinking about Luke? Are you interested in him? I thought you said you weren’t. Have you changed your mind?”

“I’m not interested in him.” I denied. “I haven’t changed my mind. I promise.”

“Don’t speak nonsense.” Millie snorted. “Half of Stowe is in love with Luke already.”

“That’s not true.” Jane grinned goofily. “I’ve got my heart set on Tristian.”

“I’m not in love with Luke either. I prefer Dean.” Tana added, her cheeks turning a deep shade of maroon at the admission.

“Do you think he likes you?” Milly asked, an indifferent look on her face as she ignored the other two.

“Who? Dean?” I joked in an attempt to make light of the situation. “I don’t even think I can remember which one is Dean, and which one is Tristian.”

“You didn’t answer the question.” Milly huffed and rolled her eyes. “Charlotte’s right. You’ve got your eyes set on him but you’re just pretending you’re not interested.”

“Why would I do that?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Maybe you think it’ll get his attention. Make you look more mysterious than you actually are.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Jane snorted, jumping in to save me. “If Renalia says that she’s not interested in Luke, then that means that she’s not interested in Luke. What reason has she got to lie? Stop trying to push your and Charlotte’s warped reality on her. We all know what Charlotte’s like, so why are we entertaining her crazy ideas? She’s only going to turn you crazy like her.”

Milly pursed her lips, but thankfully, she didn’t say anything more on the matter.

“What do you think Scotland will be like?” Tana asked quietly, clearly trying to change the subject. I was grateful for her as well. “Do you think it’s as cold as everyone says?”

“It’s probably colder,” Jane said. “We’ll have to wear thick coats and scarves all day. Even when we’re inside.”

“Can you imagine that!” Tana laughed.

“Do you think we’ll get to live inside the castle?” Jane asked, her tone curious. “I’m assuming we’ll be in the knight’s quarters, but that could either be in the castle or on the grounds. I imagine the knights will need to be close in case the King calls for us.”

“And how often do you think the King is personally going to call for you?” I snickered, highly amused by my friend’s wild musings.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged and grinned widely. “But if he decides to adopt me and my *dreamy* husband, and appoint us both prince and princess of the castle, I’m certainly not going to turn down the offer.”

“You’re crazy.” Tana laughed, and I couldn’t help but join in.

“What have you got there?” Milly suddenly asked in a sickly-sweet voice, and when I glanced over at her, she was staring over her shoulder. Glancing back to follow her gaze, I was surprised to find Luke standing right behind us with two rabbits in hand.

“Sorry to give you ladies extra work, but we spotted these two rabbits when we were drinking our ale.” He laughed and placed them on the ground near me. Between twirling the deer meat every so often to prevent it from burning and now, having to skin, season and cook these two rabbits, I had my work cut out for me. Things would go quicker if my friends were to help me with all of this, but unlike me, that wasn’t part of their job description. It wasn’t expected of them to slave away like me.

“You don’t mind, right?” Jane sent me a pointed look, and when everyone’s attention turned to me, she winked wickedly.

“No, I don’t mind.” I chuckled nervously, my face twisting into a small grimace as I reached for the dead rabbit closest to me. Not because I would need to skim and cook these rabbits–I had done this several times before with my mother, so the blood hardly affected me now–but because Luke openly stared at me with a large grin.

You need to stop doing that. You’re going to get me in all sorts of trouble.

I can’t have my mother see you looking at me like that. It’ll give her too many ideas.

“Thank you…” His voice trailed off suggestively. I knew that he wanted my name, but giving it to him would do me more harm than good. I sincerely wasn’t interested in Luke or any of his friends. The only person I was interested in was Beast, but he wasn’t here right now.

That and I didn’t want to make things any worse for myself by making Milly more jealous than she already was. It wasn’t like she had anything to get jealous over, but she didn’t seem to believe me. I also didn’t want to give my mother any ideas.

“Renalia,” Jane spoke for me when I ignored him. “Her name is Renalia.”

“Thank you.” Luke beamed gratefully at her before returning his attention to me. “It’s nice to meet you, Renalia,” His lips tipped higher at the corners as he held out his hand in front of me. “I’m Luke.”

“I would shake your hand, but my hands are dirty. Sorry.” I apologised and gestured to the rabbit that I was already halfway through skinning.

“I’ll have to catch you another time then, Renalia. When you’re not so busy, perhaps. I’ll keep an eye out for you at the feast.” Luke grinned and sent me a lingering look before he excused himself.

“Don’t think you’re special.” Milly huffed as soon as he was gone, sending me a sharp glare before leaving in a huff.

“Don’t listen to her. She’s just jealous.” Tana reassured me, and Jane did the same. I smiled at my friends before focusing on the second rabbit, needing to get it done quickly if we wanted it ready and cooked for the feast.

I was virtually a no one in this village, yet Luke set his eyes on me nearly as soon as he arrived. That was more than enough for me to

question not only his motives but his sanity.

Chapter Twelve

As fiddly as skinning those rabbits was, they sure did taste good, I thought to myself as I helped myself to another leg piece.

I had eaten more meat this evening–two rabbit legs and some deer meat–than I usually did in an entire week. I would never have dared to eat so much if this was a regular dinner, but this was a feast, food was in abundance, and no one cared who ate what or how much.

Moments like this nearly made all the hard work worth it. Nearly.

"He keeps looking at you." Jane nudged me, a playful grin on her face.

"Who?" I asked, caught off guard as I had been focused on my food. The rabbit meat had been marinated in a mint mixture and tasted like heaven in my mouth.

"The King of Scotland!" She snorted. "Who do you think?"

"My mother?" I asked, playing coy even though I knew exactly who she was talking about.

"Since when did your mother become a he?" She sent me a pointed look, playfully narrowing her eyes. "You know exactly who I'm talking about."

"I don't think I do," I sing-sang before returning my attention to my food.

This was the most amount of food on my plate than I had ever seen before. I had clearly been eating with my eyes when I loaded up my plate, and I certainly couldn't eat it all if I intended to dance the night away like everyone else.

Jane was right. Luke kept sending me obvious looks and prolonged stares when he thought no one was paying attention. It hadn't been long

since the feast started, and he had already sent me more than a few obvious glances even though he was sitting on the other side near the head of the table. He had to lean forward to get a good look at me which just made things so much worse.

My mother was quick to pick up on his behaviour, and now she was sending me large, encouraging smiles. For the first time in my life, she looked proud of me.

The only thing keeping me here right now was all the food. If it weren't for the food, I would be long gone by now.

I feared this feast was more trouble than it was worth.

"I don't mean to be rude, but what's wrong with your mother?" Jane leaned over to whisper to me, her voice unsure. "She's been staring at you for five minutes now."

"You don't want to know." I groaned and kept my head down, avoiding both Luke and my mother who stared at me like she was seeing me in a new light.

The few times I had caught my mother's eyes, she gestured with her head toward the head of the table where Luke was sitting with his uncle, the chief, and his friends. When I glanced over, Luke was already staring at me and after the first few times, even the chief and chiefess had started sending me curious looks as well, probably wondering who had caught their chief's attention.

My cheeks flamed an embarrassing shade of red.

"If your mother could make it happen, you and Luke would be married by the end of the feast." Tana giggled from beside me, but the sound was cut short when Milly snorted and sent me a sharp look.

"Don't be silly," Milly huffed, glaring at me. "Luke would never marry Renalia."

"Why? Because he's going to marry you instead?" Jane snorted.

I had never had many friends before, and the few that I did have in the past had shown their true colours soon enough. Jane was nothing like that. She had always been kind and never failed to stick up for me when some of the others were mean to me. She treated me like a normal person, a true friend, instead of a bottom feeder even though that was what my mother and I were.

"Yes. He doesn't know it yet, but he will." Milly replied haughtily, turning her nose up. She made a show of turning her head and beaming at

Luke. He eventually met her gaze, but it was only for a fleeting moment or two before he turned his attention to his friends sitting beside him. It was almost as if he had looked right through her.

“I look forward to the wedding.” Jane snickered, poking the beast.

Milly glared at her before she set her hard eyes on me. “This is all your fault.”

“How is this my fault?” I asked.

“Let’s not argue.” Tana rushed to say, looking nervous at the conflict. “This isn’t Renalia’s fault. It’s not like she’s vying for Luke’s attention. He’s the one that keeps looking at her, not the other way around.”

“She’s encouraging it.” Milly huffed and rolled her eyes. “I don’t know why he keeps looking at you. I don’t see what’s so special about you.”

I pursed my lips but bit my tongue, wanting to avoid an argument. My lips tugged down into a sad smile, and I lowered my gaze, refusing to reveal just how much her words bothered me.

I know that I’m not as worthy as the rest of you, but you don’t need to rub it in my face.

You don’t need to remind me of what I already know.

My mother does a good enough job of that already.

When Milly got up to leave, not even bothering to excuse herself, none of us tried to stop her.

“I’m so sorry, Renalia.” Jane apologised with a sigh. She threw her arm over my shoulder and leaned in for a hug. Tana was quick to join in, and I was grateful for them both. “I know it’s easier said than done but try to ignore Milly. She’s just jealous of you.”

“That’s not true, but thank you for sticking up for me.”

The hairs on my arm stood up when I felt someone–or something–bore into the back of my head. I didn’t need to look over my shoulder to know that Beast was watching me with those golden eyes of his. Instead of feeling uncomfortable like I did when Luke stared, his gaze was soothing and comforting as I finished my meal.

I wasn’t able to clear my plate and ended up giving an untouched rabbit leg up to one of the children when they asked for it. Jane and Tana had already headed into the clearing to start dancing, and I would have joined them, too, if Luke wasn’t lingering on the sidelines.

At the risk of sounding deluded, I had an inkling he was waiting for me. My mother’s eyes flitted back and forth between us with a smirk on

her face, no doubt already planning our wedding.

Swallowing my apprehensions, I sought her out instead of joining my dancing friends.

“I think I’m going to head back to the hut,” I told her, forcing a grimace.

“Why?” She asked in a disapproving tone. “It’s still very early, and you love dancing. I usually can’t stop you. What’s different today?”

“I don’t feel very well.” I lied, pressing a hand over my stomach. “I think I ate too much.”

“You didn’t finish all your food.” She pointed out, narrowing her eyes at me in suspicion.

“Well, I must be getting my monthly cycle soon then because my stomach hurts terribly,” I told her, throwing a pained wince into the mix to make it more believable. “I really think I should go lie down, mother. I don’t feel well and don’t want to cause a spectacle by fainting or worse.”

“Fine.” She sighed and pursed her lips. “But I’m only allowing this because I’m so happy this evening.”

“Why are you so happy?” I made the mistake of asking.

“Because the chief’s nephew likes you.” My mother sported a grin so wide that it took over her entire face.

“No, he doesn’t.” I shook my head in denial even though I knew there was no use.

“Yes, he does, and I won’t have you tell me otherwise.” She chastised, though the large grin remained on her face. “All of Stowe has witnessed the way he has been looking at you tonight. He’s been unable to take his eyes off you. Everyone knows he likes you. It’s so obvious!”

“I’m too sick to hear this,” I excused myself, lifting my skirts and breaking off into a light jog when my mother tried to call after me.

Chapter Thirteen

When a knock sounded on the door, I expected it to be my mother. She was probably here to either tell me off for leaving the celebrations early or drag me back there. I hoped it was the former because I wasn't in the mood to dance right now. Not with Luke still there.

"I'm surprised you're back so early," I said as I opened the door, but much to my surprise, it wasn't my mother on the other side.

It was Beast.

"Beast? What are you doing here?" I asked in surprise, rushing to pull him into the hut before anyone spotted him.

It would be difficult to explain what Beast–an unknown man–was doing here, but it would be even more difficult to explain why he was naked. I knew that strutting around in his birthday suit was normal for Beast, but it wasn't normal for us regular humans.

"See you," Beast told me with a small, hopeful smile. The way he gazed down at me with such a raw, gentle look in his eyes made me melt inside. "Miss you."

"I missed you too, Beast, but you can't just turn up like this. What if someone saw you?" I said, my cheeks beginning to burn as I struggled to keep my eyes above his shoulders at all times. It was silly for me to act prudish when we had done a whole lot more than seen each other naked, but I couldn't help myself.

Beast was a sight for sore eyes.

His eyebrows furrowed together in that cute way they always did whenever something–usually me–confused him. "Who…see Beast?" He asked, scratching the back of his head.

The simple action drew my eyes to his chiselled chest and the way his skin seemed to glisten even in the darkness. They followed the ridges of his abdomen down to his dark happy trail, and I gulped in wanton need at his semi-erect cock which twitched as if it knew I was staring at it.

“People don’t usually walk around naked, Beast.” I groaned and pressed the palms of my hand to my eyes, frustrated because my body refused to behave. “I really hope someone didn’t spot you.”

Beast shook his head, but I wasn’t sure he even understood what I meant, though it was sweet that he was trying to appease me.

“Party?” Beast suddenly asked, his eyes trained intently on me the whole time.

It took me a moment to register what he was asking. “Yes, it was something like a party,” I told him, referring to the feast I had made a poor excuse to escape from.

“Fun?”

“Kind of.” I shrugged, pursing my lips. “I’m not a huge fan of parties.”

“Not fun?” He asked, cocking his head to the side slightly as he studied me, seemingly trying to wrap his head around me and all the confusion that I emanated.

“Feasts are usually fun, but I didn’t enjoy myself much today,” I told him with a shrug. “I’ve been working all morning. There was so much to do, and I was very overwhelmed. I ate, talked to some friends, and decided to leave early.”

“Tired?” His face warped in concern.

“Yes, kind of.” I nodded. “Come sit with me,” I instructed, moving to take a seat on the bed.

There was something funny about him sitting on our bed completely naked, looking far too big for the hut, and I couldn’t help but laugh at the sight.

“Nice…hut,” Beast complimented, glancing around the place.

I knew he was being nice. The hut was clean, but it was small. Even smaller than his cave. There was a small washroom at the back but other than that, this room served as our bedroom, kitchen, and living area all in one. It was far from impressive, especially when compared to the huts of everyone else in the village, but it was home, and it was all I knew.

“Nice boy?” He asked suddenly, his voice forcing me out of my reverie.

“Who are you talking about?” I asked, my stare turning confused.

“Nice boy…at party?” He tried to explain himself better, his face a mask of concentration as his eyebrows knitted together in the middle.

“Which boy?” I asked, and this time it was my turn to be confused. “What are you talking about, Beast? I’m so confused.”

“Boy…yellow hair?” His voice trailed off, sounding more like a question than he probably intended.

My eyebrows shot up in surprise as I realised who Beast was talking about.

“Were you watching me again?” I asked, my lips turning up at the corners in hopes of making light of the situation as I playfully nudged his shoulder with mine.

Beast nodded, looking more confused at my strange behaviour.

“You don’t have anything to worry about, Beast,” I assured him, shifting to rest my head on his shoulder. “He’s a guest of Stowe right now. He’s the chief’s nephew.”

“Friend?”

“I don’t know Luke well enough for him to be a friend.”

“Luke,” Beast murmured under his breath, placing one hand on my hip while he used the other to rub his chin, suddenly turning very serious. “Luke…nice?”

“I don’t know.” I laughed and nuzzled my face into the crook of his neck as he pulled me closer. “Just know that Luke is no one to me, and he certainly isn’t what you are to me.”

“What…Beast…to you?” He asked in a low voice, turning his pointed stare to me. “What…are we?”

The truth was, I didn’t know what we were. I didn’t know how to describe it since it was far from traditional.

“Beast and Renalia.” I smiled at him, leaning up to press my lips against his in a soft, chaste kiss. I had been dying to kiss him the moment I set eyes on him tonight, and I couldn’t hold myself back any longer. “You’re Beast, and I’m your pretty flower.”

“Pretty flower.” Beast groaned against my mouth in agreement, wrapping his arms tightly around my waist as he lowered us both onto the bed. With the way his arms pressed into the pillow on either side of my head, I was trapped under the delicious weight of him, and I wouldn’t want it any other way.

The fact that he was completely naked made everything all the more accessible for us both.

When I had donned the green emerald dress earlier today, I felt like the most beautiful girl in the world but right now, with the corset loosened to free my ample breasts and the skirt of my dress pushed up to my hips so he had free access to my sopping pussy that ached for him, I knew I was wrong earlier. It was now that I truly felt like the most beautiful girl in the world.

I felt even more beautiful when he nudged my pussy lips with the thick, bulbous head of his cock. I gasped loudly and held onto his arms as he rocked forward and entered me, impaling me on his thick, throbbing cock. My eyes squeezed shut, and I arched my back into him when his balls slapped against my ass, the sound turning me on more than it should.

Beast peppered kisses all over my face and sloppy bites down the column of my neck as he rutted into me like the wild creature he was. When the sensation became overwhelming for the both of us, he raked his teeth down my bottom lip one more time before he pressed his face into the crook of my neck, groaning throatily in my ear.

I hooked my legs around his waist and pressed the soles of my feet into his delicious ass to push him deeper inside me.

His thrusts grew sloppier and harder, and he grunted louder in my ear as he neared his climax, drawing me closer to mine as well.

“Pretty Renalia…pretty flower,” Beast whispered in my ear as he slammed his hard, pulsing cock into my hungry, needy pussy for the last time, spurting his milky come inside me. The sensation was downright dirty and drove me to explode on his cock which was still buried deep inside me.

The last time Beast came inside me, he immediately left but this time, he made no move to leave me and instead, cradled me in his arms and peppered kisses all over my face, making me feel prettier than any other flower.

Chapter Fourteen

Beast's come was still dripping out of me when he rolled me on top of him and had me ride him until we both reached our second high.

"Oh, Beast!" I moaned, throwing my head back as he slowly rolled his hips into me from underneath, drawing out both our orgasms. When he pushed himself up on his elbows and latched his mouth onto a pebbled nipple, I felt some more juice gush out of me and drip onto the base of his cock.

When his cock began softening inside me, he rolled us over. He rested his head in the valley between my breasts, absentmindedly drawing patterns on the outside of my thighs. I pulled the blanket over us, and a content sigh escaped me.

"Pretty flower…like?" Beast asked in a low murmur.

I placed my hand on the back of his head and gently combed my fingers through his thick hair. For a man that lived alone in the forest and away from the rest of civilisation, his hair was very soft.

"I really liked that." I grinned as I felt our combined juices drip out of me, the sensation so sinfully erotic. Beast may have been the one to live out in the forest, but I loved having a piece of him inside me, a reminder of the way only he knew me. "I really, *really* liked it."

Beast purred–*purred?*–in satisfaction and nuzzled his face further into my chest.

"Deer good?" He asked.

"The deer was good, but I much prefer rabbit," I told him. "The meat is more flavoursome and it's not as tough to chew."

"Like rabbit."

“You like rabbit?” I asked curiously, and he nodded against my chest. “What did you have for dinner?”

“Berry.”

“What?”

“Dinner…berry.”

“That’s all you ate?” I asked, and he nodded. “Let me go see if there’s any meat left.” I tried to get up, but Beast wasn’t having any of that. His eyes widened in alarm, and he pressed down on my hips to keep me on the bed and underneath him.

“No.” He was quick to say, his eyes wide in alarm. “Beast not hungry. Beast comfortable.”

“But you only had berries for dinner. That’s not enough for anyone.”

Especially not someone the size of you.

Beast shrugged, which left a sinking feeling in my stomach that it was more often than I liked that he had such small meals. It didn’t settle well with me, but it appeared Beast wouldn’t let go of me anytime soon.

“Do you usually eat only berries for your meals?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Many…humans in forest…party.”

Understanding washed over me. With all the hunting for the grand feast this evening, Beast hadn’t been able to hunt for his dinner like he usually did. I sighed and dug my fingers deeper into his hair, gently raking my nails down his scalp. When he purred some more, I couldn’t help but grin and apply more pressure, revelling in how much he enjoyed my simple touch. The relaxed feeling didn’t last long as an uncomfortable thought popped into my mind.

“What would have happened if you were caught today, Beast?” I forced myself to ask despite the sour taste the words left in my mouth.

“Humans…hunt Beast.” He whispered into my chest, his voice so quiet that I barely heard it. “Kill Beast.”

“Has that ever happened to you before? Have humans tried to hunt you before, Beast?”

It was silent for a few moments before he reluctantly nodded. “Yes.”

A fearful gasp escaped me. If Beast were to have been spotted by one of the men while they were out hunting today, it would have meant terrible news for him. They would have tried to hunt him just like people had tried in the past.

My chest ached, and I tightened my arms around his shoulders, needing to feel him closer to me. Needing to know that he was safe and that nothing was going to happen to him.

“Beast fine.” He tried to assure me, pressing a kiss to the centre of my chest before his mouth slowly moved up to meet mine. “Beast okay. Nothing happen.”

“But something could have happened.” My frown deepened. “And it’s happened in the past as well.”

Beast didn’t say anything. Instead, he held me close and peppered kisses all over my face until I giggled at the tickling sensation. His lips quirked up at the corners at the sound, and I sighed deeply. This conversation wasn’t over, and I would worry about him getting caught and having his safety compromised later, but I dropped it for now.

Bliss enveloped us as Beast lowered his face to mine and pressed a soft, lingering kiss to my mouth. One moment he was ravaging my mouth, curling his tongue around mine, digging his fingers into my hips, and the next, he pulled away but kept me caged underneath him. Beast towered over me with his face turned toward the door, his chest rumbling as he growled quietly, the sound slowly getting louder.

“What’s wrong?” I asked cautiously, alarmed at the sudden change.

“Danger,” Beast growled lowly under his breath.

I was initially confused, but when my mother’s loud, joyful voice drifted through the air, I froze.

“Don’t worry, Beast,” I said, trying to calm him down. “We’re not in any danger. That’s just my mother. I didn’t expect her back so soon, though.”

“Bad mother?” Beast asked in a low hum, his eyes flitting across my face as he searched for any signs of a lie.

“Not technically,” I winced, mostly because it felt like I was lying. “But I don’t have time to explain the complexity of my mother to you right now.” I tried to push him off me, but it was impossible as he refused to budge. “Beast, you need to leave!” I hissed under my breath, unwilling to risk my mother discovering us in such a compromising situation.

“Leave?” he asked.

“I promise nothing is wrong,” I leaned forward to press a soft kiss to his mouth in hopes that it would assure him. “But I need you to get off me

and out of here before my mother discovers us. If she finds you here, I'm going to be in so much trouble."

The truth was my mother would kill me if she found Beast and me like this, but I couldn't tell him that. Something told me Beast wouldn't react so well to that piece of information.

"Trouble?" Beast asked, growing more and more confused with each passing second.

"Don't worry," I assured him, finally able to push him off me when he let up. "We won't have anything to worry about unless my mother sees us. And that won't happen if you get out of here before she gets here."

If my mother saw the state of me right now, scrambling to get dressed while Beast watched me, naked as the day he was born and with a glistening cock that was still semi-erect, she would no doubt suffer a heart attack. Her only motivation to recover would be so she could kill me for something so despicable.

"Beast…not stay?" His eyes grew sad as he watched me, and it broke my heart.

"Not today." I shook my head and began forcibly pushing him toward the back door where he could escape without risking being seen by my mother. "I need you to wait by the side, and as soon as the coast is clear, you can head back to the forest, okay?"

"See you again?" At the pitiful expression on his face, I rose on my tiptoes, wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed a hard, promising kiss to his mouth while we still had time.

"I promise I'll come to see you again soon," I whispered the words against his mouth before I had to push him toward the back door.

I had just enough time to get back in bed before my mother let herself into the hut.

"You couldn't even change out of your dress?" She tutted. "I guess it's a good thing that you still look somewhat presentable because there's someone who would like to meet you."

"Who?" I asked curiously, and for a moment, I wondered if she had run into Beast on his way out. Panic quickly consumed me, but I reminded myself that if that were the case, my mother would be nowhere near as calm as she was right now.

"Luke, of course! Who else would come to see you?"

“Why is the chief’s nephew here to see me?” I asked, my eyebrows furrowing together in the middle just as Beast’s did when he was confused.

“Beats me, but boy, am I relieved!” Her deep exhale only reminded me that I was a burden to her, and she couldn’t wait to get rid of me. Luckily for her, Scotland was far, far away, and even if she chose to accompany us, I wouldn’t be her problem anymore. I would be my husband’s problem. “Now, don’t be rude. Come outside and speak to him.”

“Can’t you just tell him I’m not feeling well?” I groaned, pressing my arm to my forehead in hopes that she would take pity on me and leave me alone.

“Don’t be absurd!” She gasped as if the idea was preposterous. “I didn’t raise you to be this rude. Especially to guests.”

“Luke is the chief’s guest. Not ours.”

“Renalia!” My mother chastised me in a harsh whisper. “I don’t care what’s wrong with you! You’re going to come out here and talk to this nice boy that was kind enough to not only to walk me back to the hut in the dark but also want to check up on you. That’s incredibly kind of him. Don’t be so ungrateful.”

“Fine!” I huffed and rolled my eyes, throwing back the blanket and crawling out of bed.

“What’s different about you?”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s something different about you.” She narrowed her eyes at me, suspicion swirling in her eyes.

“No, there isn’t.” The denial was casual, but on the inside, I was sweating.

“No, there definitely is, but we don’t have time for this right now.” She reached for the door handle. “Sorry for making you wait outside in the cold for so long, Luke. Please, do come in. Perhaps I can interest you in some herbal tea to warm you up?” She offered with a hopeful smile.

“Thank you for the offer, but I couldn’t possibly eat or drink anything else tonight. Or maybe even for the rest of the week.” Luke grinned before turning his attention to me, his lips curling higher at the corners. As if he was genuinely happy to see me.

I laughed at his joke, and when I didn’t do the same, she moved to gesture at me from behind his back. I forced a laugh before pursing my lips, feeling very awkward about all of this.

“How are you feeling, Renalia?” Luke asked.

“I’m feeling better, thank you.”

“You don’t look so great.”

“No?” I hummed in question, trying to feign innocence.

“Your face is flushed, and your hair is dishevelled.” Luke pointed out the obvious, not realising just how hard he had hit the nail on the head.

“I was taking a nap when you both arrived and didn’t have time to brush a comb through my hair. I apologise for my dishevelled state. I promise I don’t usually look like this.” The last part was mostly for my mother’s sake.

“Well, I’m happy to hear you’re feeling better.” Luke smiled brightly at me, and when I nodded and pursed my lips, we fell into an uncomfortable silence. I smiled at him, and he smiled back at me, all while my mother beamed at the two of us from behind Luke’s back, yet none of us said anything.

When it became too awkward, I made an excuse about feeling tired. Much to my relief, my mother fell for it, and she thanked Luke before seeing him out of the hut.

“You didn’t do yourself any favours, Renalia. You could have been nicer to your husband.” She sighed heavily as soon as she closed the door.

“He’s not my husband.” I huffed and moved to return to the bed.

“Not yet,” she sing-sang. “But judging by the way he couldn’t keep his eyes off you tonight, he will be soon.”

I laughed at her antics but didn’t dare comment anymore as that would only lengthen the conversation, and the last thing I wanted was to hear about just how perfect Luke was for me and how I would be lucky to have him as a husband.

I’m sure Luke would make some woman very happy one day, but I was certain it wouldn’t be me.

Chapter Fifteen

I had hoped that after such a long, busy day, I would be able to fall asleep quickly, but unfortunately, that wasn't the case. With Beast's come still dripping out of me and my mother staring at me like I had grown two heads, sleep was nowhere to be found.

"When are you going to change?" My mother sighed from where she stood in front of the mirror, brushing her hair.

"What?" I asked from the bed, my eyes still closed.

"Aren't you going to change out of that dress?" She pointed out, sending me a disgruntled look over her shoulder. "You'll crease it if you sleep in it, and then all my hard work will go to waste. Though, that's nothing new."

"Sorry. I didn't even notice that I was still wearing it." I admitted as I slipped out of bed to do just as my mother said. "Thank you for sewing this dress for me, mother. I've never felt so beautiful before."

"I have to admit, you've never looked more beautiful."

"Thank you, mother." I smiled brightly at her, feeling warm and fuzzy inside at the compliment. It wasn't often that my mother said something nice to me, let alone a compliment.

Once my mother and I got into bed, I leaned over to blow out the candle, but she suddenly decided she wasn't feeling so sleepy.

"You've made me very proud today, Renalia."

"First, you tell me that I look beautiful in my dress, and then you tell me that you're proud of me. Are you feeling okay?" I half-joked, starting to feel like this moment was too good to be true.

“Don’t joke.” She chastised me lightly. “I really am happy with the progress you made this evening. It was far more than I hoped for.”

“Wait.” I frowned in the darkness. “What progress?”

“Now’s not the time to be modest, Renalia. You know what I’m talking about.”

“I don’t think I do, mother.”

“Luke was so smitten with you tonight. He couldn’t stop looking at you.” She gushed like one of my teenage friends. “I expect he’s falling asleep with you on his mind tonight. That’s quite the accomplishment.”

“I wouldn’t quite say that.” I groaned and rolled over to bury my face in my pillow, hoping to avoid yet another long, uncomfortable conversation.

I wasn’t interested in Luke. Not in the slightest. Why was that so difficult for everyone to understand?

“Why not? I’m just stating the truth. Luke is absolutely smitten with you.”

“I doubt the chief’s nephew is smitten with me.” I snorted.

“Then you must not have seen the look on his face the entire evening.”

“I was just focusing on the food,” I told her. “I wasn’t looking to catch anyone’s eye.”

“Well, you’ve done it, though it would have been even better if you sat closer to him during the feast.”

“But then I wouldn’t have been able to eat in peace with all his incessant staring.” I teased.

“Aha!” My mother giggled gleefully, not like herself at all. “So, you did notice that he was smitten with you!”

“I’d have to be blind to miss him staring at me all night, though that doesn’t mean he’s smitten with me.” I huffed. “For all we know, he could just be some creep with a staring problem.”

“Don’t speak about your future husband like that.” She berated me in a chastising tone. “You shouldn’t be so quick to dismiss Luke. He’s the chief’s nephew and has a very bright future ahead of him. He could make you very happy. Besides, he seems to like you, so that counts for a lot. No man has ever looked twice at you before, so you should be grateful.”

Beast has done a whole lot more than look twice at me.

“I’m not interested in Luke, mother,” I repeated like a broken record. “I don’t think we have a future together, so please stop pushing it. You’re

just wasting your breath."

"Future? What do you know about the future? If you had your way, I'd be stuck with you for the rest of my life."

"Fine, I won't dismiss him so quickly. Can we go to sleep now?" I groaned, giving in. Not because I was interested in Luke, but because I needed my mother to stop speaking so I could finally get some sleep. I had only claimed to feel sick before, but I was really starting to feel sick now. I guess that was the effect my mother's words had on me.

"He's such a lovely boy, don't you think?" She continued, completely ignoring me. It was almost as if I hadn't said anything in the first place. "Did you see him walk me home? That was so kind of him! I told him he didn't need to do that, but he insisted. And then he wanted to check on you. They don't make gentlemen like him nowadays."

"Yes, mother."

"I think the chiefess also noticed that Luke took a liking to you."

"What makes you say that?" I asked, turning my head to face her, my interest piqued.

"She came up to me earlier and casually slipped in that Luke was looking for a wife."

"I'm sure you were glad to hear that," I said, my tone sarcastic.

"I was, and you should be, too." My mother rolled her eyes at me. "She told me how wonderful he was, and that he's looking to settle down with a wife. Both his parents are still alive, and he has an older brother. His father is the chief of the village he's from…I don't remember the name, but it must be well-known because the King had personally reached out to ask for their best men to work for him as knights. Naturally, Luke was the first option."

"That's a lot of information," I murmured, my eyes starting to feel heavy.

"Be sure to remember it all, so you have something to talk about when you see him next time." She sent me a pointed look. "You know, Renalia. He asked me about you on the walk home."

"What did he ask?" I asked curiously. "Or more importantly, what did you say about me?"

"Don't worry. I didn't say anything bad." She teased. "All I did was sing your praise. I didn't stop going on about how good you are at cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, and maintaining a home."

“I’m sure he loved to hear that.”

“He hung off my every word.”

“Are you sure you’re not the one he’s smitten with?”

“Oh, Renalia! What did I tell you about speaking such absurd things?” She groaned in frustration, but by the time I turned my head to glance at her, another large grin had replaced the previous one. As if her mood hadn’t dipped in the first place. “Do you want to know what else he asked?”

“What?”

“He asked us to join him, the chief and the chiefess for dinner at their hut sometime during his stay.”

“What?”

“That was my exact reaction when he first suggested the idea! Of course, I kept my internal outburst to myself. I didn’t want to ruin your chances of becoming his wife, but let me tell you, Renalia, I was screaming and leaping for joy on the inside.”

“I’m not going to marry him, mother.” I huffed and rolled over onto my back.

“I did not raise you to be this negative and ungrateful.” My mother clicked her tongue in disapproval. “There are so many young girls in Stowe that would kill to be in your position right now. Your friend, Milly, just to name one of them.”

“Yes, I noticed that, too.” I chuckled dryly. “I’m not being negative or ungrateful,” I sighed. “I just don’t want you to get ahead of yourself. Luke might not ever propose to me, and I’m perfectly fine with that because I have no interest in marrying him.”

“After witnessing tonight, I’m confident that I’m not getting ahead of myself. And remember what I said, Renalia. You need to be more grateful.” She reminded me. “You don’t have many eligible suitors knocking on our door for your hand in marriage. Actually, you don’t even have one.”

There was one eligible suitor who came knocking at our door earlier.

“I quite like it that way.” I chuckled.

My mother continued to talk my ear off but I feigned being asleep to save myself. The plan worked in no time, and as soon as she started snoring, I slipped out of bed. I grabbed a spare blanket and headed toward the forest where my lover awaited me.

Even though Beast had ravished me twice already today, I wanted him again. Not just that, but I wanted to fall asleep beside him. I had never felt so safe, protected or at home than when I was in his arms, and I wanted nothing more than to feel that every night for the rest of my life.

Chapter Sixteen

"I brought a blanket so we wouldn't be cold," I murmured into the darkness. Even though I couldn't see him, I knew he was out there. Watching me. Waiting for me. Hoping that I would come. Knowing that I would come.

"For Beast?" Beast asked, gently rubbing the less-than-impressive blanket that had seen better days. It wasn't soft, fluffy, and made of wolf fur like Beast's blanket, but it served its purpose. Kind of.

We should have thrown this blanket out years ago for a newer one that would do a better job of keeping us warm, but I always put up a fight when my mother suggested we get rid of it. She didn't understand, but this blanket was my childhood. I had been sleeping with it since I was a child and couldn't stomach the thought of ever parting with it. Frankly, I was surprised my mother hadn't thrown it away when I was out of the hut, but perhaps the woman wasn't all bad.

"Beast…keep it?" Beast asked eagerly, his eyes sparkling as he continued rubbing the worn-out material between his fingers.

"Yes," I immediately answered. I surprised myself with how quick I was to give up my childhood blanket that I hadn't slept a single night without but for Beast, I was willing to do that and so much more.

There was something sweet and touching about the fact that Beast was just as fond of this crappy blanket as I was.

"Can I go for a ride on your back again?" I asked with an eager smile, wanting nothing more than to experience again the sliver of freedom I had rejoiced in yesterday.

“Ride.” Beast grinned and nodded. He leaned in to press a soft, lingering kiss to my lips before he stepped back.

I had seen Beast in both his forms–beast and human. I had also seen Beast transform from his human form to his beast form enough times that I hardly blinked now at the transformation. Instead of being scared and confused like the first time, it often left me in appreciative awe.

With the blanket wrapped around me, I watched as Beast dropped to the ground on all fours and hunched over in front of me. Fur sprouted all over his body, starting from his feet and calves, quickly spreading all the way up to his neck and head. His nose grew longer and the nostrils wider, and his teeth grew bigger and longer, sharpening as they grazed his bottom lip. This creature looked nothing like my Beast, but his golden eyes looked the same. Looked at me in the same way. Like I was the most precious thing in the world and he was lucky to have me. Little did he know it was the other way around. I was the lucky one to have him.

One moment, my precious Beast was hunched over in front of me and the next, there was a wild animal in his place, dropping himself onto his stomach to make it easier for me to climb onto his back.

I could barely hold in the blissful moan as I ran my fingers through his soft fur. Beast growled quietly before he rose to his feet, warning me to hold on tight.

Unlike last time, I wasn’t scared. This time, I beamed from ear to ear in excitement. I held my head high when he began off in a slow gallop, testing the waters, and my elated grin only grew in magnitude as he went faster and faster, zipping deeper into the forest. My fiery hair whipped around me, and I had to hold onto the blanket with one hand so it wouldn’t go flying; the other curled tightly around the fur on the back of his neck.

Just like last time, the ride ended far too soon. However, I could tell that we had gone deeper than last time. It would be a pain to navigate out of it at sunrise by myself if Beast was still fast asleep, but it would be so worth it.

My jaw dropped in a mix of awe and shock as I slid off Beast’s back. My feet tramped on several small, beautiful, multi-coloured flowers, but it was inevitable with how many there were in the clearing. The ground was covered with flowers as far as the eye could see. Beast crushed far more than I did with his large build and paws. However, there was plenty more to make up for them.

I felt bad for anyone who didn't know about this beautiful place.

"Pretty flowers for pretty flower," Beast told me after he transformed back into his human, gently tugging on the bottom of the blanket I still had wrapped around me.

It was the prettiest bed of flowers I had ever seen.

"Thank you for bringing me here, Beast." I leaned forward to press a soft kiss to his mouth in thanks. "This place is so beautiful. How did you find it?"

"My home."

"You live here?" I asked, my eyebrows knitting together in confusion. "I thought you lived in the cave."

"Forest…my home," he clarified. "Forest…mine."

"Well, thank you for sharing this with me. I've never seen such beautiful flowers before."

"Welcome."

I inhaled the floral scent that encompassed us and wondered how many flowers this never-ending clearing was covered with.

"Tell me more about yourself. I want to know everything there is to know about you." I prompted him in a small voice as I settled between Beast's legs with the blanket thrown over us.

So far, all I knew about him was that he called himself Beast, though I suspected that wasn't his birth-given name, that he lived in the forest, and he was a creature who could transform into a human and back. I hardly knew anything about the man I hoped to spend the rest of my life with.

I felt Beast shake his head behind me. His arms tightened around me under the blanket, and he nuzzled his face into the back of my neck, purring quietly.

"Is your name really Beast?" I asked, refusing to give up.

"Beast." He confirmed with a nod.

"Is that what your parents named you?"

"No parents."

"What do you mean?" I asked curiously, trying to be as cautious as possible. "Everyone has parents. You must also have parents. You couldn't have been born anyway else."

"No parents." He repeated, looking pretty sure of himself. "Beast alone. Beast…always alone."

"What about when you were a baby? Where did you live?"

“Forest.”

“I know the forest is your home now, but where did you live before coming here?”

“Other forest.”

My eyebrows rose in surprise. “Why did you leave the other forest?” I asked, holding my breath as I awaited his answer. Mostly because I was afraid of what I knew he would say.

“Humans…hunt Beast. Beast leave.”

“I’m so sorry, Beast,” I whispered the apology, turning my head to brush my lips against his chin. “I can’t begin to imagine how that must feel. Has it always just been you? No siblings? No friends?”

“Only Beast.”

“That must be lonely.”

“Beast…and Renalia now.” The small, hopeful smile on his face caused my heart to flutter. “Beast and pretty flower.”

“Yes,” I assured him with a wide grin and a soft kiss. “It’s me and you now. You’re not alone anymore. You don’t ever have to be alone ever again. I’m never leaving you. Ever.”

Beast kissed me back and tightened his arms around me, holding me close to his chest. It was comforting to know that we now had each other to rely on. I also had my mother, but I wasn’t naïve enough to believe I could rely on her. Or that she loved me the way mothers were supposed to love their children. Without me in the picture, she could have lived a normal life and gotten married. She wouldn’t have been cast as the village outcast for bearing the entire brunt of a mistake committed by two people.

When my mother found out she was pregnant, she informed my father, a traveller. He seemingly took the news well and was calm. She once admitted that she was hopeful he would propose to her now that they would be parents, but he disappeared the next morning. After that, marriage proved impossible for my mother.

Ever since, she had been alienated from the village and I, too, by association.

Even though it wasn’t my fault as I had never asked to be born, or for my mother to sleep with my father before they got married, I sometimes found myself weighed down by guilt for ruining her life.

Of course, my loneliness was a mere speck of dust compared to Beast’s. I had a few trustworthy friends I could turn to when being around

my mother became unbearably difficult sometimes, but Beast had no one. From this day forward, I vowed to change that. As long as I was around, Beast would never have to be alone again.

“How long have you lived in these forests?” I asked, gazing up at him as I sat snuggled into his chest.

“Maybe year.” Beast shrugged, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“How come I haven’t seen you before?”

“Didn’t want.” He said. “Beast watching you.”

“You were watching me the whole time, but you didn’t want me to see you?” I tried to clarify.

He nodded, yes.

“Why is that?”

“Humans…not like…Beast.”

“I like Beast.” I was quick to tell him, unable to stomach the forlorn and heartbroken expression on his face for a moment longer. It truly broke my heart to see him anything but happy.

“Pretty flower special.”

“Am I the first human you’ve met that hasn’t tried to hunt or hurt you?” I held my breath as I awaited his answer, afraid of it.

Beast nodded and turned his face away from me. That didn’t settle well with me, but if I ever wanted to find out the truth, then I needed to push.

“Beast…scare humans.” He sounded so broken and sad. “But not pretty flower.”

“I have to admit, I was a little scared at first,” I told him, purposely downplaying just how terrified I was when I watched him transform the first time. But clearly not that much as I laid back and spread my legs for him when he instructed. Besides, looking back now, I had nothing to worry about. Beast would have never hurt me.

“Good scared.”

“What do you mean?”

“Pretty flower good scared. Not human scared.”

“You’re right about that.” I chuckled. I was not as scared as I should have been, and not anywhere near as scared someone else would be if they were whisked away to a dark cave in the middle of the forest by a creature that was able to transform between human and beast form at the drop of a hat.

“When you say humans hunt you, what exactly do they do?” I asked, my voice small and shaky.

“Chase. Scream. Fire. Pitchforks.”

My heart broke as I stared at him, unable to stomach the thought of anyone doing that to him. Of anyone trying to harm Beast when I knew he would never do the same to them.

Beast had lived a life of solitude in the forest, moving whenever he was discovered by humans who tried to kill him for simply existing. If only they knew just how powerful he was and that they’d need so much more than pitchforks to rid the world of his existence. If only they knew how good he was. How harmless he was. How similar he was to us.

I understood their fear but spending only a few minutes with Beast would assure anyone that they didn’t have anything to worry about. Despite appearances, Beast was a gentle soul, and I had never felt safer with anyone than I did with him.

“Humans say…Beast monster.”

“Don’t listen to them. They don’t know what they’re talking about.” I was quick to say. I cupped his face, pulled it down and pressed his forehead against mine. I stared directly into his golden orbs, needing him to understand that I meant every word. “You’re not a monster. Your name is Beast, and you’re beautiful. So beautiful. You’re so kind, and gentle, and loving. I’ve never felt safer than when I’m with you. You’re not a monster so don’t call yourself that. I never want to hear you call yourself that again, alright?”

Beast was quiet for a moment. There was an indiscernible look on his face as he stared down at me.

“Beast…beautiful?”

I threw my head back and laughed. As if that was the only part he had paid attention to!

“So, so beautiful.” I grinned and parted my lips in anticipation, angling my head to meet him halfway. When his lips finally pressed against mine, I exhaled in bliss and all but melted into his arms.

This is where I belonged, and this was where I wanted to spend the rest of my life. In Beast’s arms, out in the forest.

Chapter Seventeen

"Pretty flower," Beast whispered against my mouth, licking along the seams of my lips, asking for entrance. My impatient man nipped at my bottom lip, and when my lips parted in a gasp, he took the opportunity to slide his tongue in, hungry for a taste.

"How pretty?" I moved to straddle him. I pressed my knees firmly into the ground on either side of his thighs and wrapped my arms around his neck to eliminate the little distance between us. I moaned quietly when he ravished my mouth, making me writhe desperately on top of him. My moans only grew louder and unrestrained as his cock pressed against my core.

"Prettiest flower." He groaned, pressing one last bruising kiss to my lips before pulling away.

Before I could demand that he get his mouth back on me this instant, Beast reached down to bunch up the bottom of my dress. All complaints died on the tip of my tongue as I rushed to help him. The material eventually settled around my hips to reveal the most intimate part of me to him.

My pretty flower.

It wasn't anything he hadn't seen before, but it still made me blush madly. Especially when his eyes raked over me like I was a delicious, sweet treat and he was dying for a taste.

"Am I prettier than these flowers?" I whispered, lowering myself on the flower bed. When my back hit the ground, I spread my legs as wide as they would go, presenting myself to him. His gold eyes darkened, and his chest rumbled with desire as he lowered himself to press it against mine.

He crushed the flowers around us with his broad arms as he braced them on either side of my head, caging me in underneath him.

Not that I wanted to be anywhere else right now. Or ever, for that matter.

“Prettier than all flowers,” Beast promised me, a dark glint in his eyes.

Before I could reel him in for another slow, dirty kiss, Beast dipped his head to press a kiss to the column of my neck. He licked a long stripe from my collarbone to the bottom of my chin, and I shuddered wantonly underneath him.

“Beast.” I moaned his name.

He merely grunted as he brushed his lips against the corner of my mouth before dipping his head once again. Such a tease. He kissed and sucked the supple flesh of the top of my boobs before he moved down to my stomach and the junction between my legs. My breath hitched in my throat at the featherlight touch, and it quickly travelled south until his lips were plastered to my wet pussy lips, pulling them apart to reveal my dripping pink core to him. Beast dived into my hole, sucking and licking like my juices were the sweetest nectar he had ever tasted.

I was a moaning, writhing mess underneath him, pinned to the ground by his muscular arms as he ate me out like a starved man. My back arched when he flicked my throbbing clit with his tongue and dangerously raked his teeth over it. There was nothing gentle about Beast as he sloppily sucked at my clit, his teeth occasionally nipping my outer lips.

As heavenly as his mouth felt on me, it was nothing compared to the full feeling of his fingers buried inside me up to the knuckle, the palm slapping my clit each time as he pounded them into me, hitting that magical spot inside me each time.

“That feels so good,” I moaned like a wanton whore, thrusting my hips up, desperately chasing my release. “Please, don’t stop, Beast. You feel so amazing.”

“Stop?” Beast questions, momentarily stopping his sucking, licking, biting, and finger-thrusting to glance at me, half-serious, half-teasing. Afraid that he would pull his fingers out of me, I clamped my legs shut around his head, forcing him to stay in place between my legs. Where he belonged.

“Don’t you dare stop!” I growled in frustration, on the verge of tears as I continued to rock my hips back and forth, aching for some friction.

“Beast!” I continued to whine. “I need to cum. Please get inside of me. I need you!”

Thankfully, *that* he understood.

Beast growled lowly in appreciation as he grasped my knees and pried them apart. I moaned at the hungry look in his eyes and felt my pussy become even slicker with desire. It was a good thing because, like the rest of him, Beast’s cock was huge.

I barely had time to catch my breath as Beast pushed forward and sank into me. He didn’t stop until he bottomed out inside me, and his balls slapped against the curve of my ass, going deeper and deeper each time he thrust into me. My eyes rolled to the back of my head when he reached between us and pressed his thumb against my clit, pressing down hard.

“Beast. God! You feel so good inside me!” I moaned and arched my back, palming my boobs and tweaking my hard nipples as he ruined my pussy for any other man. Not that there would ever be any other man after Beast.

“Tight,” Beast grunted in my ear, placing sloppy, wet kisses all over my neck as he pulled out of me completely and slammed back in. He repeated this over and over again until I was a mess of tears and desire underneath him, desperate for my release.

When Beast abruptly pulled out of me again, I groaned in frustration, but before I could complain, he grabbed my hips and flipped me onto my stomach. He pushed my legs together and pressed down on the small of my back, keeping me on the ground while he slipped back inside my tight pussy which welcomed him back with a tight clench.

I couldn’t help but moan into the flower bed as Beast ploughed into me from behind, feeling so much bigger and going deeper from this angle. All the pleasure he was giving me distracted me enough for him to slip his thumb into my asshole, going all the way up to the knuckle on the first try.

“Mine soon,” Beast whispered and pressed a kiss underneath my ear, the promise sending a pleasurable shiver down my spine.

I surprised myself when I didn’t push him away. I surprised myself even more when I moaned and pushed my hips back, not just for his cock but also for the delicious feeling of his finger in my asshole.

“I’m going to need to get used to the size of you first,” I murmured and rose on all fours to thrust back on him better–determined to give just as good as I was getting. “You’re so big you’d tear me up back there.”

“Soon?” Beast asked.

“Soon,” I promised him with a naughty grin, but he wiped it straight off my face with one particularly hard thrust that sent me over the edge.

I came hard on Beast’s cock, screaming my pleasure into the flowers as he continued to thrust into me through the orgasm, not only drawing it out but chasing after his own until finally, he slammed hard into me one more time before spurting his milky come inside me, painting my pussy walls white with his seed.

That night, I learnt the true meaning of animalistic sex. And how Beast felt the need to show me how appreciative he was when I complimented him. I looked forward to doing a whole lot more of that in the future, especially if Beast would fuck me like that more often.

Chapter Eighteen

I had never slept so well before. Perhaps, it had something to do with the field of flowers we had fallen asleep in, or maybe it was the way Beast held me even in his sleep, making me feel safe and warm and like I was the most precious thing to him in the entire world.

It was the most peaceful I had ever felt waking up, and not just because my mother wasn't around to demand that I stop being lazy and get to work.

All those clothes aren't going to wash themselves, she would say.

The peaceful moment dissolved when I felt something twitch inside me. My cheeks warmed when I thought it to be Beast's come still dripping out of me, a reminder of all the naughty fun we had gotten up to last night. They blazed dangerously with a dirty red flush when I glanced down and realised that not only were Beast and I an entanglement of our bodily limbs but his cock was still buried balls-deep inside me.

"Beast," I whispered harshly into the morning air, trying to wake him. "You need to wake up, Beast. I need to get back home before my mother realises that I snuck out last night."

"Pretty flower," Beast murmured in his sleep, his eyes shut and his face completely serene and peaceful as he turned his head to nuzzle it further into the crook of my neck. The simple action sent shivers down my spine, and I wished I had more time to just lay like this with him. To be able to savour the feeling of being wrapped up in each other like this and not worry about anything else.

"Now isn't the time for sweet talk, Beast," I groaned lightly, unable to resist dropping a hand on the back of his head and gently raking my nails

down his scalp. Just the way he liked it. “You need to wake up. Or at least get off me so I can leave.”

“Leave?” Beast asked, his eyes flying open and growing wide as he stared at me, the sadness and uncertainty slowly creeping into them.

I hated that I made him feel like this. That I had to sneak off every morning before my mother awoke. I wanted nothing more than to spend forever in Beast’s arms, but deep down, I feared that would never be possible for us. That our forever would never come.

A human and a beast? Would that ever work?

“I’m sorry, Beast. I would love to stay with you all day, but my mother would never allow it.” My tone was soft and soothing as I continued to massage his scalp. “I *really* need to leave, Beast.”

“Come back?” He asked in a small voice, and I nodded quickly. “Promise?” I nodded again. “Good.” A slow grin spread over his face before he bowed his head to press a big, wet kiss to the valley between my boobs.

“What are you doing, Beast?” I groaned half-heartedly, though made no move to push him away. “This wasn’t part of the agreement.”

“Pretty flower.” Beast chanted as he continued the sloppy trail of kisses down my stomach, over my mound and then finally, to my pussy lips which were still sticky from the remnants of our fun last night. My attempt to stop him so I could return to the hut quicker was feeble and half-hearted, and Beast knew it.

After Beast made me come on his wet tongue and thick fingers, I was even stickier than when I woke up this morning, but we didn’t have time to wash up. Instead, I rode on his back to the entrance of the forest where we had met yesterday. He transformed back into his human form and had me back in his arms in the same second.

“Pretty flower stay,” Beast demanded as he held me close behind the trees, hidden from prying eyes.

“I wish I could stay, Beast, but I can’t.” Despite my words, I nuzzled my face into his chest. I wanted to stay as much as Beast wanted me to, but that wasn’t feasible. “I need to get back before my mother wakes up. If she finds me missing, I’ll be in so much trouble, but I promise I’ll come to see you again tonight.”

Beast tightened his arms around me and his lips parted to protest some more, but he was cut off by a familiar voice.

“Renalia?”

Beast and I stilled when we heard the voice, catching us off guard. A few moments of silence passed before I allowed myself to exhale in relief. For a moment there, I thought we had been found out–

“Renalia? Is that you?” The same unfamiliar voice called out again, and this time, I knew I couldn’t ignore it without running the risk of them coming to investigate and stumbling upon Beast and me.

Not only wouldn’t I be able to explain the strange reason why Beast was naked and I was plastered to his chest, but I also didn’t want to risk anyone asking any questions about Beast. He had already suffered enough with humans trying to hunt him once they discovered his existence. I didn’t want that to happen here. Not only would he have to leave, but there was also the risk of Beast getting seriously hurt. Or worse.

I gulped, not able to stomach the thought of Beast hurt. If anything happened to him, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.

“I need to go before whoever that is comes looking for me, Beast. But I promise I’ll see you again tonight.” I whispered the promise against his lips in a quick, sweet kiss before I ducked out of his arms and rushed to leave the forest before we were found out.

When I glanced over my shoulder, I was thankful that Beast had left, but I could feel his eyes on me. Watching me. Protecting me.

“I thought I heard you.” Luke greeted me with a large grin as I came out of the forest. “What were you doing in the forest?”

“I went for a walk.” I lied smoothly.

“This early in the morning?” He asked, far too curious for my liking.

“Yes,” I answered curtly. “What about you?”

“Same reason as you.”

“Then why were you so surprised to hear that I was going out on a walk?”

“You looked awfully sick last night.”

“I don’t think the deer settled well with me,” I told him another lie. “I feel so much better now. I think the walk and fresh air really helped.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Luke grinned, looking as if he wasn’t going to leave me alone anytime soon. “Where are you headed now? Back to your hut?”

I nodded, yes.

“Well, you must let me walk you back then.”

“There’s no need for that. It’s only a short walk, and I don’t want to put you out of your way.” I tried to deny it, but the look on his face told me there was no use. He had made up his mind, and there was nothing I could do about it but accept his offer.

“I insist.”

“Well, since you insist.” I forced a smile and resisted the urge to glance back at the forest one last time to look for Beast. The last thing I wanted to do was make him jealous. Especially over someone that didn’t warrant his attention or jealousy. And that wasn’t a dig at Luke but rather the sheer magnitude of my feelings for Beast.

“Do you do this often?” Luke asked.

“Do what often?”

“Go for early morning walks in the forest?” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, gesturing behind us.

“Yes,” I confirmed with a nod. “I love walking through the forest regardless of the time of day.”

“I’ve noticed.” Luke chuckled. “I believe we ran into each the other morning when you were running out and knocked me over.”

“I’m sorry about that.” I winced in apology.

“What were you running from?”

“I wasn’t running from anything. I realised I had been out for too long and needed to head back to help my mother with the washing.”

“Dishes?”

“No, clothes,” I told him, hating how my cheeks warmed at my answer. “My mother and I wash the village’s clothes for a living.”

“The entire village’s clothes?” Luke asked, his eyebrows shooting high as he stared at me. When I nodded, they rose even higher. “I have three brothers. My mother is always complaining about washing our clothes and my father’s all the time. I sometimes help her out, and it’s hard work. I can’t imagine how hard it is to wash an entire village’s clothes. That must be so many clothes for you both to get through.”

“It’s definitely harder than it looks.” I agreed with a sigh, thinking of all the clothes that were waiting for me. It would be less than yesterday as there wasn’t a feast tonight or a special event to dress up for, but it was still tiring. “I hear you and your friends are moving to Scotland soon.” My voice purposely trailed off, looking to fill the awkward voice as he walked me back to my hut.

“That’s right.” He nodded. “Dean, Tristian, and I were asked to join the King’s guards, and we agreed. He has ties with my father. That’s how that came about.”

“How long will you be working for the King of Scotland?” I asked, more so to sate my curiosity than anything else.

“Hopefully forever.” His lips tipped at the corners into a wide grin. “I’m a little nervous about it, but more than anything, I’m excited to start my new life. It’ll be exciting.”

“Congratulations.” I smiled at him, holding back the grimace which was a better depiction of how I truly felt. I couldn’t imagine moving to Scotland. Before, it was because I couldn’t imagine leaving behind the life I had always known, but I now had more personal reasons to stay here. Like Beast.

“I think you’ll like Scotland.” Luke hinted rather obviously, but thankfully that would be the most of it as we had arrived back at the hut. With my mother standing at the entrance to greet us, grinning and waving enthusiastically, I pretended I didn’t hear him.

“I wondered where you had gone off to so early in the morning.” She beamed at us. “If I had known you had gone for a walk with Luke, I wouldn’t have needed to worry.”

“Sorry to worry you, Maya.” Luke apologised for the both of us, and my eyebrows shot up in surprise. Since when did Luke start addressing my mother by her first name?

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Luke.” She waved a dismissive hand in the air, her jovial mood not wavering in the slightest. “Renalia is always sneaking off for a walk in the forest.”

“She sure does love the forest.” He grinned but it was directed at me, all while my mother sent pointed looks between us both. I knew my mother, and she was no doubt planning our wedding in her head right now. That only made me more desperate to get rid of Luke so some sense of normalcy could return to my morning, but unfortunately, my mother beat me to it.

“Why don’t you come in and have breakfast with us?” My mother suggested, the hope evident on her face.

“That’s very kind of you, Maya. I would love that, thank you.” Luke grinned as he accepted the offer, his eyes slowly glancing over at me for my reaction. I offered him a forced smile, hoping he understood that I

wasn’t interested in him the way my mother was so obviously trying to pair us together.

She all but squealed in excitement silently, beaming from ear to ear as Luke walked into our hut.

I just knew this was going to be a long morning.

Chapter Nineteen

I didn't know who was more insufferable, Luke or my mother.

Luke asked me every question under the sun about myself and my mother would alternate between smiling brightly at him in encouragement and glaring harshly at me when she didn't appreciate one of my responses. The worst thing was that we were sat in a triangle during breakfast, meaning that there was no escaping either of them. The situation was a whole lot more unbearable because all I could do was wish for nightfall to come sooner so I could sneak away to the forest to see Beast again.

Knowing that he was waiting for me made me pine for it even more.

It was frustrating that we could only be together at night, and it was only for a few hours at the very most as I needed to get back to the hut before my mother awoke and realised that I was missing. While those few hours were the highlight of my day–or rather, night–I wanted nothing more than to spend my days with Beast as well as my nights. And not just one night, but every night. For the rest of my life.

Unfortunately, with my life here in Stowe, his out in the forest, and my mother constantly breathing down my neck, the possibility of that was starting to look slim. Very slim.

My mind drifted to Beast in a bid to cheer myself up. What did he do when I wasn't with him?

Hunt?

Sleep?

Clean his cave?

That last one had me giggling quietly to myself, but it was enough to attract the attention of my mother and Luke who appeared to be engrossed in a conversation of their own.

“I have to apologise for my daughter’s lack of manners, Luke.” My mother snapped her fingers in front of my face, forcibly pulling me out of my daze. “She has a knack for daydreaming at the most inconvenient of times. You must forgive her for the bad habit.”

“You don’t have anything to apologise for, Maya.” Luke grinned at my mother before glancing over at me. It still weirded me out how casual they were with each other. “I find Renalia’s daydreaming rather endearing.”

“That’s a first.” She grinned widely at Luke but then turned to send me a disapproving look when he glanced down at his bread.

My mother had certainly pulled out all the stops for our breakfast with Luke. We usually shared stale bread for breakfast, but there was nothing stale in sight this morning. To pair with the freshly baked bread, we also had some sweet raspberry jam, boiled eggs and some freshly squeezed orange juice. I had no idea how she had managed to find all of this on such short notice, let alone afford it.

With how prepared she was, you’d think she had somehow planned for this.

“Why don’t you tell Luke a little bit about yourself, Renalia?” My mother prompted me, an expectant look on her face. She did a good job at hiding it under a bright, friendly smile, though I could see right through it.

“There’s not much to say.” I shrugged and glanced down, hoping Luke would take the hint that I wasn’t interested.

“I find that hard to believe.” He smiled encouragingly at me. “What about your name? Isn’t Renalia a type of flower?”

I shrugged, not wanting to answer. I saw my mother purse her lips from the corner of my eye, and I couldn’t help but shrink in my spot. I knew I was making her mad, but I didn’t like Luke, and the last thing I needed to do right now was encourage his affection.

Why can’t you understand when I say no? I’m not interested in him.

I’ve got my heart set on someone else, but I can’t tell you that. You would never understand.

“That’s right. Renalia is my favourite flower. We don’t see it very often, less now than when I was a child, but I always thought they were pretty.” My mother answered for me, and my eyebrows shot up in surprise.

You've never told me that before.

Why have you never told me that before?

"That makes sense." Luke beamed, his eyes lingering on me. "There are some renalia flowers that grow near my village, and I always found them very beautiful."

"She is, isn't she?"

My eyebrows shot up in surprise, half because of her suggestive words, and half because of the compliment from my mother–that was two in two days now. I dared not say anything for fear of ruining the memory.

You've really got your heart set on me marrying Luke, don't you?

Thankfully, Luke had to leave straight after breakfast as the chief needed him and his friends for some work.

"You and I need to have a little talk." My mother turned to face me as soon as Luke left.

"What did you want to talk about?" I asked, my eyes downcast as I washed the dishes from breakfast.

"You'll have to be more forthcoming if you want to secure Luke's affections and then him as your husband. Your efforts over breakfast were appalling. It's like you weren't trying at all."

That's because I wasn't trying!

"Renalia! Are you listening to me?" She snapped at me.

"Yes," I murmured.

"Your behaviour over breakfast today was appalling."

I inhaled sharply but didn't say anything. There was no point saying anything. She wasn't going to listen to me anyway.

"Can you imagine how that poor boy must have felt? He was kind enough to go on a walk with you this morning, and then you ignore him during breakfast?" My mother continued to chastise me, making me feel smaller and smaller even though I had made it clear from the very beginning that I didn't want any part of this.

I didn't ignore him. I just didn't have anything to say to him.

"Renalia!" She huffed, having lost all patience now. "You need to fix things with Luke. You need to assure him that you're interested before it's too late. Before he casts his sight elsewhere."

If Luke were to cast his sight elsewhere, on someone else, that would massively work out in my favour.

“But I’m not interested.” I finally plucked up the courage to say. “I’ve already told you that I don’t want to marry him.”

“And I’ve already told you that’s not an option.” She glared sharply at me. “Stop being so selfish for once and think of your poor mother.”

All I do is think about you and what you’ll think and how you’ll take things. Is that not enough for you?

What more could you possibly want from me?

“Luke is the chief’s nephew, and soon, he’ll become one of the King’s knights. You’re lucky that he’s even paying you any attention in the first place. By marrying him, not only would your status in the village go up but so will mine. Try thinking of me for once. We’ll no longer be bottom feeders here anymore. I’ll never have to wash clothes or slave away to survive anymore. Don’t you want that for your poor mother? Don’t you want me to have a better life?”

“Of course, I want that.” I exhaled.

“Your actions certainly don’t seem like it.” She snorted with a harsh scowl on her face. “You need to try harder. You need to show him that you’re interested and reciprocate his feelings. You won’t be able to secure him as your husband without trying.”

“Fine,” I sighed, agreeing to give in even though I had no intention of pursuing or encouraging Luke in any way. At this point, I was willing to do anything to end the conversation. “I promise I’ll try harder.”

“That’s all I wanted to hear.” She exhaled in relief. “Now that we’ve got that sorted, we need to start working. You’re not married to Luke yet, so we still have to wash clothes.”

I stood up to get dressed quickly so I could join my mother outside, however, the quiet squelching of my sticky pussy lips was enough to send a ferocious blush to my face, a reminder of the man that had become a permanent not only between my legs but also in my heart. The only man that I was interested in marrying. Not Luke.

“What’s wrong? Why do you look like that?” My mother shot me a disapproving look.

“I need to wash up first,” I told her.

“Right now?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“You didn’t wash up before your walk?”

“No. I didn’t have time.”

My mother sent me a funny look. She didn’t look convinced, but thankfully, she didn’t move to stop me either. “Well, don’t be long. There are a lot of clothes to wash, and they’re not going to wash themselves.”

“I won’t be long,” I promised and grabbed a towel and a dress to change into before heading into the washing chamber.

I dropped my nightdress and reached for the bucket, holding my breath as I poured the water over my head. The water soaked my hair first and whatever wasn’t absorbed travelled down my shoulders, arms, and chest, and then further down.

It was bittersweet, washing Beast off my skin, but it was also very sticky. And now that his come was no longer dribbling out of me, the stickiness between my legs was uncomfortable.

My cheeks heated at the thought of all the sex I had been partaking in lately. I went from being a blushing virgin to being a wanton whore whose mind was constantly clouded with the allure of sex. Before I even left his arms, I was thinking about when I would be able to return to him next.

Hopefully, one day, I wouldn’t have to leave his arms at the crack of dawn every morning. Instead, I would be able to spend the whole night in his arms, and then we would be able to spend the whole day together for the rest of our lives. It was a simple life, but that was the kind of simplicity I craved.

All I wanted was to be with Beast, but my mother would sooner suffer a heart attack than allow that to happen.

Chapter Twenty

My fingertips pruned quickly, though that was a given as there were always so many clothes to wash. They were set to prune even more when my mother dumped the rest of today's pile of clothes on me so she could leave to help the chiefess with something.

"How is this fair?" I grumbled to myself as I scrubbed a stained shirt against the wash rack, having to really put my back into it to get the stain out. "Why do I always get stuck with all the dirty work while my mother gets to have fun?"

"Bad mother again?" A gruff, husky voice sounded from behind me.

At the sudden sound, I gasped and dropped the shirt I was washing. It fell to the dusty ground in all its wetness, ruining my efforts of the past fifteen minutes.

"Great! Now I need to wash it all over again." I groaned in dismay, my jaw clenching as I reached down to retrieve the wet material. Now, not only did I need to remove the stains, but it was also covered in dirt and dust.

If I wasn't so engrossed with the washing, I would have realised who the intruder was that had startled me.

When my eyes landed on Beast standing behind me with my blanket wrapped around his waist to cover his nakedness, I gasped and dropped the wet shirt. Again.

"Beast?" I called out to him, blinking in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Pretty flower…angry?" His eyebrows furrowed together in concern, and I couldn't help but reach out to swipe my thumb over the skin there. I

didn’t like seeing him anything but happy.

“No, I’m not angry, Beast. You just startled me.” I offered him a small smile so he wouldn’t worry. “Why have you got the blanket around your waist like that?”

“Humans…not naked.” Beast tried to explain, scratching the top of his head.

“What are you doing here?” I asked again.

“Missing you.” Beast shrugged, his lips turning up at the corners into a slow, hopeful smile.

When the corners of my lips turned up to match his smile, he closed the distance between us and pulled me into his arms. The both of us were now standing atop the wet shirt, and by this point, it was starting to look like a lost cause, and frankly, I couldn’t bring myself to care anymore.

“I missed you too.” I grinned and met him halfway, pressing my lips hard against his.

Beast bit down on my bottom lip and soothed the sting by gently sucking it into his mouth. I moaned and melted into his arms, my own travelling up the wide expanse of his bare chest until they eventually circled his neck, slanting and pressing his face even closer to mine to deepen the kiss. Being this close to someone proved impossible to breathe normally, but I didn’t care. I could die like this–kissing Beast and holding him close–and I wouldn’t regret a single thing about it.

On the contrary, I would die a happy woman.

When we finally came up for air from all the nipping, sucking, and clashing of tongues, I tiptoed to press my forehead against his.

“You should probably head back to the forest now.” I panted against his mouth, still a little short of breath. “We’re already risking you being seen by someone.”

“No.” He shook his head and uncurled his arms around me, but not before stealing yet another kiss. “Beast stay. Help.”

“Help?” I questioned in surprise, turning around to follow him.

“Washing,” Beast explained with a grunt, reaching down to grab the shirt we had both trodden on.

Perhaps the third time would be the charm.

“Are you sure?” I asked, hesitant.

“Beast help.” He nodded, determined. “Beast always help.”

My heart fluttered at his words, my feelings for this man growing exponentially with every little thing he did. Even something as small as helping me wash this big pile of clothes.

Beast and I fell into a comfortable silence as we stood beside each other, washing clothes for all of Stowe. Surprisingly, I didn't need to show him how to do it. He already knew how to use the soap and all the other little tricks that made it easier to get all the stains out. It made me wonder just how long Beast had been watching me because there was no way he washed his own clothes as he didn't seem to own any.

It was nice. Really nice. And I appreciated it more than I could explain.

It was also the first time that I had been out in the open like this with Beast. Every other time, we were either safely hidden in the forest, or he had been secretly watching me. Of course, there was that one time he snuck into our hut when my mother was still at the feast.

Anyone could come looking for me here. Anyone could happen upon us and catch Beast–a half-naked stranger with only a blanket around his waist–helping me wash these clothes. If things were different around here, I was sure it would have been a comical sight.

My smile dimmed slowly at the thought. I kicked myself for allowing my mind to wander and ruin our time together, especially when we were both having such a great time, even if it was something as mundane as washing clothes together.

"Beast." I exhaled deeply and turned to glance up at him. "You need to head back to the forest before someone sees you. I really appreciate you helping me, but we can't risk you getting caught."

I can't risk something happening to you.

I couldn't live with myself if something happens to you.

I'll never forgive myself if anything happens.

You matter too much to me.

"Beast help." He tried to argue his case, gesturing to all the clothes he had speedily washed already. Initially, I feared he would tear the material with his large, beastly hands and sharp claws, but he was surprisingly gentle. After he had washed an item of clothing clean, he squeezed out the excess water and hung it up on the washing line without me prompting him to.

“Thank you so much for helping this much, and I know you want to help more, but the risk is just too high.” I frowned, hating the voice of reason that reared its ugly head from the back of my mind.

The deep frown on his face told me he wasn’t happy about this, but the way he trudged around the washing basin to pull me into his arms and press a hard, toe-curling kiss to my lips assured me the anger wasn’t directed at me.

I was grateful Beast understood, but I hated that he had to leave just as much as he did.

Beast decided to play dirty as he pressed one hand to the small of my back and the other dug into my hip, rubbing himself against me. I groaned lowly against his mouth and kissed him harder. My pussy clenched and began to grow slick with need for him.

“Beast.” I groaned his name. “You’re not playing fair.”

A low rumble sounded from deep within his chest, and it went straight to my pussy which ached painfully for him.

One moment I was kissing Beast goodbye and seconds away from yanking the blanket around his waist to reacquaint myself with his not-so-little friend that poked me in the stomach, and the next, I was wiping my mouth on the back of my hand, trying to make it look like I hadn’t just been making out with a man that lived out in the forest.

“Jane? Tana? What are you two doing here?” I called out to my friends whom I had heard coming while making out with Beast. I tried to look as casual as possible, making a show of working hard to wash a shirt that was already clean.

“Why do you look like that?” Jane asked, never one to beat around the bush.

“Like what?” I asked, cursing my body for giving me away. I didn’t need a mirror to know that my face burned with a fierce flush which rivalled the colour of my hair.

“You look like we’ve just walked in on you with your hand in the cookie jar.” She grinned, her eyes steady as she watched me carefully.

Jane was only teasing me, but she didn’t know just how right she was. And if I wanted to protect Beast, she could never know the truth.

“You two just caught me by surprise.” I tried to dismiss the matter, but neither of them looked all that convinced.

“Who were you talking to just then?” Tana asked before clarifying, “Before we arrived.”

“No one. I’m a little embarrassed to admit it, but I was talking to myself. I do that sometimes.”

“All this washing has made you crazy!” Jane laughed, a teasing grin on her face.

“I have to keep myself company somehow.”

“Don’t let your mother hear that.” Tana snickered.

“I certainly won’t.” I laughed.

“We’re not interrupting you, are we?” Jane asked.

“Not in the slightest.” I shook my head even though that’s exactly what they had done. Of course, I couldn’t be truthful with my friends without exposing Beast. After learning of his bad experience with humans in the past, that was the last thing I would ever want to do. “I could do with the company.”

I would rather die than witness anything happen to Beast. No one would even try to get to know the gentle soul I knew him to be. Like others in the past, I feared they wouldn’t waste any time sharpening their pitchforks and chasing him through the forest, chanting for his head.

The mere thought sent a fearful shiver down my spine.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Renalia?” Jane asked, a slight look of concern on her face. “You don’t look so well.”

“I’m fine,” I nodded and sent her an assuring smile, not wanting to draw any more attention to myself. “I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Tell us about it,” Tana said.

“Luke joined my mother and me for breakfast this morning.” I groaned at the painful memory. “She’s obsessed with the idea that Luke is interested in me, and she won’t believe me when I say that it’s not true. He’s just being nice. I’ve already told her that I’m not interested in him, but it’s as if I don’t have any say in the matter even though it’s my life.”

“You could do worse than the chief’s nephew and a royal knight, you know?” Jane pointed out, her lips curling into an easy smile as she fell for my excuse.

“I know.” I sighed in agreement. “But it would be nice to have my opinion factored into the equation. She’s not the one who has to live with the decision. I do. I mean, it is *my* life.”

“But don’t you think it’ll be fun?” Tana pitched in, beaming from ear to ear. “If you marry Luke, Jane marries Tristian, and I marry Dean, we’ll all move up to Scotland together. We can all stay friends and meet up like this every day when our husbands are working.”

“That does sound mighty fun.” Jane squealed in excitement, reaching out to take Tana’s hand.

“It sure does,” I faked a grin, pretending to be just as excited as them even though the notion of marrying someone that wasn’t Beast made me feel sick.

As much as I adored the few friendships that I did have, especially with these two girls who were always kind to me while some others weren’t, Beast mattered the most to me. He was the most important person in the world to me even though we hadn’t known each other that long. I didn’t just want to spend more time with him. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him, and all this talk about Luke was seriously starting to worry me.

Thankfully, Jane’s mother called for her not long later, and Tana decided to join as she, too, needed to head home to help with the lunch preparations. As soon as I was confident that my friends were out of earshot, I turned to stare at the forest.

“Beast?” I called out to him, first in a whisper, still fearful that someone would overhear and discover us. But when I didn’t get a response I tried again and again, getting louder each time, only to be met with a resounding silence.

Chapter Twenty-One

"I have great news!" My mother grinned from ear to ear as she burst into the hut later that evening. She was busy with the chiefess all day, so I had to wash all the clothes by myself, and now it felt like my fingertips were pruned beyond the point of return.

"I hope your news is that we don't have to wash clothes to keep a roof over our heads anymore," I replied sarcastically.

"You're joking, but that might become our reality soon." She sent me a pointed look, handing me some bread which was probably a day from going stale. In exchange, I handed her a bowl of vegetable soup I had just taken off the fire.

"Can you just tell me instead of speaking in riddles?" I groaned, far too tired for any riddles this evening. Even after Beast's tremendous help, there were still so many clothes to wash.

"Don't take that tone with me, Renalia." My mother huffed. "Come sit down to eat with me, and I'll tell you my news."

Heeding her demand, I sliced the bread into four, poured a bowl of soup for myself and joined my mother at our makeshift table on the floor.

"Are you going to tell me now?" I asked, blowing gently on a spoonful of soup before lifting it to my mouth. The carrots and leeks I had put in the soup were soft and flavoursome, but it would have tasted better with some chicken or rabbit. Too bad we couldn't afford meat more than once or twice a week.

"I was cooking for the chiefess today. The chief brought home the most beautiful deer, and they needed someone to cook it." Even though deer wasn't my favourite meat, my mouth watered at the thought. Even deer

would make today's soup taste better and heartier. "Before I left, the chief called me into the dining room for a talk, and guess who was there!"

There's only one answer to that question. You wouldn't get this excited over anyone else.

"I don't know." I shrugged, feigning nonchalance.

"You could have at least put some thought into it, Renalia." She pursed her lips, disappointed. "Luke, Dean, and Tristian were there, eating dinner with the chief. Oh, and the chief's son was also there, but he's far too young to be of interest to me."

"It makes sense they were there since they're all staying with the chief."

My mother rolled her eyes at me, but her excitement remained. "The chief called me into the dining room, and in front of them all, he announced that you and I are invited to his hut for dinner tomorrow!" She all but squealed, her stew no doubt turning cold from neglect as she continued to recount today's events instead.

"What?" I asked in surprise, staring up at her with wide eyes.

"I know! I couldn't believe it either!" She beamed at me from ear to ear. "Even though Luke had mentioned it in passing once, I had thought he said it just to be polite. I didn't think it was a real invitation, but it was!"

"Wow," I murmured, needing a few moments for the initial shock to wear off.

In all my life, I had only been to the chief's hut twice, and both those times, I had only been in the kitchen to help. I entered through the back door that led directly into the kitchen and left as soon as the work was done.

"And you know what the best thing is?"

"What?" I asked, surprised that my mother could be more excited about something other than having dinner with the chief and the chiefess of Stowe tomorrow.

"Luke looked so excited!" She grinned widely. "He couldn't sit still the entire time the chief was talking, and after I agreed to the dinner tomorrow, he looked happier than a man does on his wedding day. Or the day his wife gives birth to a baby boy."

I rolled my eyes at the comparisons, not anywhere near as excited as my mother. On the contrary, I was dreading it. The last thing I wanted was to have dinner with Luke. I didn't feel anything for him, nor did I want to

explore anything with him, and attending the dinner tomorrow was only going to give him the wrong idea.

“Good for him,” I muttered under my breath, focusing my attention on my stew which I suddenly found very interesting. A lone carrot, soft and bright orange, lay in a pool of creamy liquid. It didn’t look like much, but it ensured I wouldn’t go to bed on an empty stomach.

“I don’t understand what’s wrong with you, Renalia.” My mother huffed, rolling her eyes at me with a deep scowl. “You should be more excited about all this.”

“I think dinner at the chief’s hut tomorrow can be nice.” My words were deliberate and carefully hand-picked. Unfortunately, this was not lost on my mother.

“And Luke?”

“What about Luke?”

“He’s the part of tomorrow’s dinner you should be most excited about.”

“We’ve already discussed this, mother.” I groaned. “Luke seems nice, but I’m not interested in him. Trust me, I feel privileged to be invited to dinner with the chief and the chiefess tomorrow, but you know it’s just going to complicate things.”

“I don’t see how it can complicate things. In fact, it’s just going to simplify everything.”

“How is it going to do that?”

“It’ll give Luke a chance to get to know you better tomorrow in the presence of his uncle and aunt. They’ll see how smitten he is with you, and then everything will fall into place. You’ll see, Renalia.”

I groaned and pressed my face into my hands, wishing I was anywhere but here right now.

How difficult is it for you to understand no?

What part of ‘I’m not interested in Luke and don’t want to marry him’ don’t you understand?

“You need to work on your facial expressions, Renalia. You need to look excited when Luke proposes marriage to you tomorrow.”

“Luke’s not going to propose to me tomorrow.” I groaned, pressing my face further into my hands.

“You’re right. It might be too early for that.”

I exhaled in relief, but it didn’t last long.

“I suspect he’s going to ask to court you. Either way, spend some time in front of the mirror tomorrow. You need to look perfect for when he asks you. I’ll help with your hair and help pick out a dress, but you also need to put some effort in. I can’t do everything by myself. You’ll be the only one marrying him, after all.”

Luke and his friends had only been here for two days, and my mother was already driving me crazy.

Much to my mother’s frustration, I refused to speak to her for the rest of dinner. I couldn’t stand to hear her talk for a moment longer, and thankfully, after a while of me ignoring her, she got the hint. I was surprised that she left me alone for the rest of the evening, but I was grateful, nonetheless.

My sour mood meant I couldn’t enjoy the rest of my bread and soup. As soon as I was done eating, I got started on the dishes. The sooner I finished with them, the sooner I could head out to the forest and escape all my problems in the sanctity of Beast’s arms.

I couldn’t ever imagine wanting to be anywhere but in his arms.

“Where do you think you’re going?” My mother demanded to know when I approached the door.

“A walk,” I said, my fingers curled around the handle, itching to yank it open and run away to the forest before my mother could stop me.

“I don’t think so.” She snorted and rolled her eyes. “Close the door and get in bed.”

“Why not?” I asked, my lips tugging down into a deep frown. “I always go for a walk after dinner. This is nothing new.”

“We’ve already talked about this. Besides, you need your beauty sleep for tomorrow.”

“It’s not even that dark yet.” I pointed out, but the argument was futile.

My mother merely sent me a pointed look and moved over on the bed to make room for me. When she pulled back the blanket, her gaze still not wavering from me, I knew that the conversation had ended, and there was nothing I could say or do to change her mind.

Trying to conceal my disappointment, I forced myself to get into bed beside her. After a long day, the last thing I wanted was an argument.

With all the excitement from today, my mother took longer than usual to fall asleep, and when I did finally leave the hut for my nightly stroll to the forest, it was much later and darker than usual.

“Beast?” I called out to him as soon as I got into the forest, surprised that he wasn’t already waiting for me like he usually was. When I didn’t receive an answer from him, and he didn’t show up in front of me as I expected, I called out for him again, but he never came.

I tried again and again, but still nothing. My eyebrows furrowed together in concern, and I prowled through the forest in search of him, but still nothing.

I knew he had been watching me today, so where was he now? He had always been the one to come find me, so I had no idea where to go or what to do. I couldn’t remember where the cave, the stream, or even the field of flowers was located, and I cursed myself for not paying more attention.

This wasn’t like Beast at all.

Had he fallen asleep waiting for me? It was possible, but I didn’t quite believe it.

Did he think I wasn’t coming tonight? No, I had been coming to the forest every night for the past couple of weeks, and I promised Beast earlier that we would see each other tonight.

Was he upset? Maybe, but I couldn’t imagine why. And I couldn’t imagine Beast being so mad at me that he didn’t want to see me.

Had something happened to him? No. If Beast had been discovered, it would have been the talk of the village, and I would have heard of the news of the creature in the forest by now.

I tried to think about what I could have possibly done during our last encounter but came up with nothing.

Beast showed up to help me wash clothes. We kissed and hugged, embracing each other in only a way that a husband and wife should, but he loved that as much as I did.

So, if I hadn’t done anything, then what happened? What changed? Where was Beast now, and why wasn’t he here to greet me like he always was?

I continued walking around the forest until my feet ached and my eyelids grew heavy with sleep.

Unable to battle sleep, the cold, and the heavy weight of loneliness any longer, I was forced to accept defeat for tonight.

With my arms wrapped tightly around myself and my head bowed in sadness, I was forced to head back to the hut, sneaking back in just the way

I had snuck out hours ago, only to lay awake all night, afraid that something was terribly wrong.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Renalia!" My mother called out from where she was walking several steps ahead of me. "Stop dragging your feet and hurry up! If we're late, I'll make sure everyone knows it wasn't my fault."

My mother had been dancing on the balls of her feet in excitement nearly all day. She had been floating around the hut since the morning, imagining all the different scenarios Luke would get down on one knee for me even though I was adamant nothing like that would happen this evening. The more my mother gushed about it, the more dread settled in the pit of my stomach, and now, only a few minutes away from the chief's hut, I felt physically sick.

"Coming, mother," I answered with a frustrated groan.

My mother was difficult to deal with when she was her usual terrible self, but it turned out she was completely insufferable when she was happy.

"Oh, hurry up!" She called out to me again. "You're going to make us late if you carry on at that pace. Could you imagine being late to dinner with the chief and chiefess? They're never going to invite us back! Oh, the shame!"

I don't care if we never get invited back to dinner at the chief's hut again.

At the risk of sounding ungrateful, I didn't want to be invited over in the first place.

"We're early," I said, but one harsh, pointed look from my mother was enough for me to hike up the bottom of my skirt and pick up my pace.

“You look a right state, do you know that?” She huffed as we finally came to a stop outside the chief’s hut, only seconds away from knocking on the door.

“Thank you for the words of reassurance, mother, and just when I was going to say that you look lovely this evening,” I replied dryly, resisting the urge to roll my eyes.

“Of course, I look lovely!” She exclaimed. “Unlike you, I put in an effort today. I even wore my best dress, and you know I’ve been saving this dress for your wedding day.” She told me, gesturing to the deep blue of the material which fell over her body like a waterfall. The dress was beautiful, and my mother looked great in it, but it didn’t make me feel any better about tonight. “The least you could have done is not have worn something so plain. You could have listened to me and worn that purple dress. You actually looked good in it for once.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks, mother.”

“You know how important this dinner is to us, and you still didn’t listen to me.” She whined.

This dinner is important to you. This is just going to be a long evening for me.

It hasn’t even started yet, and I already can’t wait for it to be over.

I wanted to tell my mother that other than the delicious food we were promised–and not just because we had helped out with it earlier today before returning home to get dressed–there was nothing else that I looked forward to this evening. That specifically included being in such close proximity to Luke.

Frankly, I was surprised that the chief and chiefess were encouraging Luke to pursue me. My mother and I were the bottom feeders in Stowe. We washed everyone’s clothes to put food on our table, clothe ourselves and put a roof over our heads. We were the opposite of well-off and respected–it was old news by this point, but the entire village knew that my mother was unmarried and I had been born out of wedlock–but it didn’t seem like the two leaders cared.

I was forced out of my thoughts when I felt a sharp pinch on both my cheeks.

“Ow! What was that for?” I glared at my mother as I rubbed my cheeks and stepped back to escape her hands before she tried to attack me again.

“Don’t blame me for trying to make you look more presentable for tonight.”

“Presentable?” I scoffed. “Please do tell me how I’m going to look presentable with your fingerprints on my face!”

“Nonsense!” My mother sent me a sharp look. “My fingerprints are not visible on your face. Besides, you look so much better already. You have such a youthful flush about you now. It almost makes up for that plain dress you chose to wear tonight.” She spat, referring to what was now my second favourite dress, having been trumped for the first spot by that emerald, green dress mother had specially stitched for me for the feast. As much as I adored that dress, I had actively chosen to not wear it this evening.

The last thing I wanted to do was give anyone–namely Luke–the wrong impression.

Before I could argue with my mother some more, the door swung open, and the both of us turned to stare at none other than the man that had single-handedly dominated nearly every conversation since he had arrived in Stowe only a few days ago.

“Maya! Renalia!” Luke grinned as he held open the door, inviting us in. “I thought I heard your voices outside.”

“Renalia was just asking how she looks.” My mother lied smoothly, moving on to greet the chief and chiefess who welcomed us into their home with warm, welcoming smiles.

“Well, you have nothing to worry about, Renalia.” Luke grinned as he closed the door behind us. “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.” I forced an uneasy smile before following in my mother’s footsteps to greet the kind hosts.

I don’t want to be here right now. I don’t want to be with any of you right now. I know what you’ve got planned, and I hate that I can’t do anything about it.

I just wanted to be in the forest.

With Beast.

“You look lovely tonight, Renalia.” The chiefess told me, her embrace gentle and warm.

“Thank you, chiefess.” I smiled brightly at her. “Not nearly as lovely as you, though.”

I was speaking nothing short of the truth when I said the chiefess looked lovely tonight. She wore a black, simple dress, but the way it hugged her womanly curves, splaying out at her waist like a ballroom dress made her look nothing short of a princess. A queen.

“Oh, you’re such a sweetheart.” She laughed. “But no more with this chiefess business. From now on, I insist that you call me Nancy. Both of you.” She all but demanded of us, turning her head to send my mother the same pointed look she gave me. “We are family, after all.”

My mother and the chiefess–Nancy–were second or third cousins, but the relationship was so distant that we barely acknowledged it.

“And we’ll be even more of a family soon enough.” The chief added in with a hearty chuckle.

His words caused me to freeze and stare back at him with wide, disbelieving eyes.

Did I hear you correctly?

Us? Family?

I know what you’re all planning behind my back, but I thought you’d try to ease me into it. Give me some time to come up with a plan to save myself.

I gulped hard and turned to Luke. When I found him already looking at me, his eyes distant as a small smile played on his face, I knew that I was in trouble this evening.

This was nothing short of an ambush.

Nancy ushered us all into the dining room, and we all got seated. The table was large enough to seat eight people. Naturally, Andrew and Nancy–this was how the chief and chiefess insisted we now address them–were sat at both heads of the table, my mother sat on the right of Nancy, and I beside her.

It felt oddly strange to be sat at a dining table. My mother and I didn’t own one as it cost too much money to get carved, and we didn’t earn nearly as much despite all the clothes we washed. Jane and her family owned one, and the closest I had ever been to it was to serve food when they had guests staying with them and needed an extra pair of helping hands.

I had been hopeful that Luke, Dean, and Tristian would take the three vacant seats on the other side of the table, but when Luke abandoned his

friends and joined us on our side, choosing to sit right next to me, I cursed myself for being so naive.

I can't believe that everyone is being so blatantly obvious about it.

They're not even trying to hide that they're trying to set Luke and me up.

No one has even asked if I'm interested in this. If I'm interested in him. If this is even what I wanted.

"I hope you like deer, Renalia. There's plenty of it to go around." Andrew grinned at me, and I thanked the server that piled my plate with food.

"I love deer." I smiled politely even though I found deer hard to chew and much preferred rabbit. However, beggars couldn't be choosers.

"But you much prefer rabbit, right?" Luke leaned over to whisper.

"That's right." I nodded, surprised by his observation. "How did you know that?"

"I saw you at the feast." He shrugged. "You ate very little of the deer. I also noticed that when your friend asked to exchange it for a rabbit leg, you looked almost relieved."

"Rabbit has more flavour," I told him. "But deer is also very nice." I was quick to add in case Andrew or Nancy were listening in on our conversation. By this point, I wouldn't be surprised if they were. It felt like everyone around the table was watching us two.

"I'm the same." Luke chuckled. "But I prefer some nice meaty boar over rabbit."

"I've never had boar."

"Never?" He asked, a twinkle in his eyes as he subtly turned in his chair to angle his body toward mine, giving me his undivided attention.

Please don't do that. You're going to give everyone the wrong impression.

"Never," I repeated, shaking my head.

"Well, next time I come across a boar, I'll hunt it for you."

If you do that, you're just going to make things worse for me. It's difficult to be mean to you when you're so nice.

Why can't you be a horrible person? That'll make my life so much easier, though I doubt my mother would back off.

"Oh no. You don't have to do that for me. What would I do with a whole boar?" I chuckled nervously as the last thing I wanted was to lead

him on. I wasn't interested in pursuing or exploring anything with Luke, and the sooner he understood that, the better. If we didn't have so many pairs of watchful, curious eyes on us, I might have been tempted to lean over and tell him the truth.

"I insist."

Despite my apprehensions regarding this whole evening, it went rather smoothly. Even more surprisingly, I found myself having a good time. Not only did Luke prove to be nothing short of the perfect conversationalist with his interesting anecdotes, but he was also funny, a good listener and had perfect manners.

He offered to pour me some more ale before my glass was even empty, and when no one was looking, he snuck the last of the deer meat off my plate and replaced it with some boiled potatoes that were flavoured with mint–my favourite–and were absolutely to die for. It proved that I had been too hard on him without getting to know him. However, that still didn't mean that I wanted to marry him.

Beast was the only person I was willing to marry.

Speaking of Beast, he didn't come to see me yesterday, and there was that small, nagging fear in the back of my mind that something was wrong, and I wouldn't see him tonight either. I didn't want to think that something was wrong, or that Beast was mad at me, but I couldn't think of any other reason why he wouldn't meet me in the forest like we had been doing nearly every night these past couple of weeks.

Unfortunately, things quickly turned sour when the dinner came to an end.

My eyes shot up to Luke when he stood up abruptly, nervously tugging on the collar of his shirt. The sudden action commandeered the attention of everyone at the table, and I desperately tried to come up with an excuse to save myself before Luke did what I feared he would do. What my mother had been harping on about all day.

There was a sinking feeling in my stomach when Luke turned to me, a small, nervous yet hopeful smile on his face.

Please don't do this.

I'm begging you, please don't do this to me.

"There was something that I wanted to ask you, Renalia."

"What's that, Luke?" Andrew asked in encouragement, a knowing smirk on his face.

Luke cleared his throat, his lips quirking higher at the corners into a bigger, more confident smile.

“First of all, I would like to ask Maya’s permission to court her daughter, Renalia.” Luke turned his attention to my mother. The expectant look on his face told me they had already discussed this without me. That my mother knew about this all along and she had kept it from me.

“Yes, of course.” She rushed to answer.

“Thank you, Maya.” His eyes twinkled as he turned to me again. “Renalia,” he began, gulping hard. “I have had my heart set on you since you ran into me for the first time, and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you ever since. I would love to be your husband one day, but before we get ahead of ourselves, I would like to propose that you allow me to court you.”

I can’t believe this.

I can’t believe this is happening to me right now.

I could feel everyone’s eyes on me, eagerly awaiting my answer.

His aunt. His uncle. His two closest friends. And my mother.

I didn’t need to glance at my mother to know that she was holding her breath, praying that I didn’t turn down what she would describe as my only chance of ever getting married. I was certain that if I were to turn this down, she would bury me alive. But then if I accepted, I would want to bury myself alive.

Whatever I decided, there was no winning for me.

There was no way that I could marry Luke despite his sweet words and pleasant personality.

Absolutely not!

“Well, Renalia,” Andrew cleared his throat, breaking the heavy, prolonged silence that filled the hut. “What do you say?”

With everyone’s eyes on me, the pressure was crippling. All I could think about was how I could make it out of this situation staying true not only to myself, but also to the man that owned my heart.

“Luke…” I began, but my voice trailed off when I struggled with my words.

“Yes?” Hope shined in his eyes as he stared at me, silently begging me to agree.

“Luke, I–”

“Oh, don’t be so cruel, Renalia. Put the poor boy out of his misery.” My mother chastised me with a feminine giggle and sickly-sweet voice. “Of course, she agrees to court you, Luke!”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Several days had passed since my mother had agreed for Luke to court me. I had tried to speak to her immediately after the dinner at the chief's hut that evening, but it was impossible. She refused to listen to me, lost in her happy bubble.

I kicked myself for not refuting her in front of everyone at the dinner. For not proving her wrong and letting Luke down gently. But she had answered yes on my behalf, and they all started celebrating before I could correct her.

I couldn't even refute her when it was just the two of us in the privacy of our hut.

The next morning, news of Luke and my courtship was the talk of the village–I'm sure my mother had something to do with that–and a few days later, even though I had gone out of my way to avoid him at all costs, we were still at the centre of all the gossip.

No longer was I Renalia, bottom feeder. Clothes washer.

Now, I was Renalia, the chief's niece-to-be and Luke's future wife. The worst part was that it wasn't just my mother who thought that. Everywhere I went, people treated me differently. They treated me better. They no longer ignored me unless they needed me to wash something.

I had lived in Stowe all my life, but never before had anyone around here treated me with such respect and dignity. It was like I was a different person.

I guess I was a different person.

I was now a woman with a man attached to my name, even if we were just courting.

A noticeable difference was that people stopped dropping off their clothes for my mother and me to wash. This posed a problem at first, but when Andrew and Luke dropped by with gifts and an assortment of food, day after day, it appeared we didn't need to prune our fingers to make ends meet anymore.

I now owned some of the prettiest dresses I had ever seen, and my mother and I found ourselves with a plump rabbit at our disposal for dinner every evening. The notion of being bought didn't settle well with me, but my mother was beside herself, claiming that she was finally living the life she deserved.

I actively tried to avoid Luke, but the few times I saw him, we were never alone. Even though the notion of it made my skin crawl, I needed to get him alone so I could tell him the truth. After all, it was not I who agreed to the courtship. My mother had agreed before I could find the words to turn him down, and everyone had run with it.

The only thing keeping me sane these past few days was the yearning to see Beast.

Every night, I snuck out to the forest to see him and every night, there was no sight of him. I walked for hours on end, searching and calling out for him, but nothing. I had even found the stream and field of flowers he had taken me to before, but he was nowhere to be found.

The scary thought of him being hurt, or worse, plagued my mind, and with each passing day, I was finding it increasingly difficult to go on without seeing him. Without knowing how he was, and why I hadn't seen him in nearly a week. I would be more worried about Beast being hurt, or worse, if people were talking about it in the village. When someone hunted a large animal–usually a deer or boar–it was hot gossip in Stowe for days. If someone hunted an animal as large as Beast, it would be the talk of the village for years.

Even if Beast was hurt, I couldn't imagine him staying away from me for so long. The way he looked at me, held me, *touched me*, assured me that he reciprocated my feelings but if that was truly the case, then where was he?

"You've got that look on your face again." My mother said, watching me through the mirror as she brushed her hair with the new comb Luke had dropped off this morning. He had gifted two, one for me and one for

my mother, but I refused to use it. Just like I refused to use the other gifts he'd tried to bribe me with.

It was my mother that had agreed to this courtship, not I.

"What look?"

"The look that tells me you're thinking very hard about something. Tell me, what's going on in that little head of yours? What have you been thinking so hard about these past few days? And don't try lying to me. I'm your mother. I know when something is bothering you."

"Nothing." I shook my head, unable to even fathom the thought of telling my mother about Beast and how much his sudden disappearance was bothering me.

"It doesn't seem like nothing to me." She pursed her lips at my quick dismissal.

"What do you think of Luke trying to buy my affection with all these gifts?" I asked abruptly in an attempt to change the subject.

I wasn't myself when I was worrying about Beast, and I didn't trust myself not to slip up with the truth if she kept pushing to find out what was wrong.

"I'd hardly class this as him trying to buy your affection." She laughed. "All I see is a husband simply trying to provide for his wife and keep her happy. That's what men do. Good men."

"He's not my husband, and I'm not his wife." I huffed, my lips quirking down into a deep scowl.

"Yet." She pointed out. "But I must tell you, Renalia, it's only a matter of time now until he gets down on one knee for your hand in marriage. He hasn't got long left here before he needs to leave for Scotland, so a proposal is inevitable."

"He's not going to propose to me," I said, refusing to believe it.

"He will." She insisted. "I know he will."

"I didn't even agree to court him."

"Not this again." She groaned and rolled her eyes, clicking her tongue in frustration. "I couldn't stand there and watch you throw your life away, Renalia. As your mother, I stepped in to do the right thing when you couldn't. That's what a good mother does. The right thing."

You've never been a good mother, so why start now?

How could you agree to it when I've spent all week talking about how I don't like Luke? About how I don't want to pursue anything with him.

About how getting married to him and moving up to Scotland was the last thing I wanted.

You betray me like that and still consider yourself a good mother?

"And when Luke finally proposes to you, I'll be sure to step in and make sure you do the right thing then as well."

I scoffed but dared not say anything. The foundation of an argument had been brewing between my mother and me for days now. Even before she agreed to the courtship on my behalf. In my nineteen years, I had never won an argument with my mother, and I feared that this time would be no different.

I just want you to leave me alone. I want you to keep your nose out of my business and allow me to make my own decisions. Allow me to lead my own life, even if that means having to make my own mistakes.

Just because your mistakes ruined your life doesn't mean mine will ruin mine.

You might think that you know what's best for me, but we both know that you're only looking out for yourself.

You're selfish.

You've always been selfish.

That's never going to change.

If Luke was twenty years older, or you twenty years younger, I'm sure you would be married and pregnant with his child by now.

"You've got that horrid look on your face again."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore. I'm not going to marry Luke, and there's nothing you can do to change my mind." I huffed and moved to the door, needing to get away from my mother. "I've been invited to Jane's hut for lunch with the other girls. I'll be back to cook dinner later."

Since we weren't washing clothes anymore, we suddenly had so much more time on our hands. While a large portion of my time was monopolised by knocking heads with my mother and trying to avoid Luke, I still had plenty of time left to spend with friends.

"What are you all doing?" I asked Tana as I approached her, Milly, Charlotte, and a few other girls from the village who were currently huddled in the front room of Jane's hut. My eyebrows shot up in surprise when I spied Jane's mother at the head of the herd, standing with her ear pressed against the door.

“Tristian walked in and requested a private moment alone with Jane.” Tana squealed.

“It’s rather improper of him, if you ask me,” Charlotte tutted. “My husband was far more tactful when he asked for my hand in marriage. First, he asked my parents and then, he–”

“Oh, shush, Charlotte!” Mille rolled her eyes. “Don’t you remember that we all know James is your first cousin? Of course, your father would never say no to his favourite little nephew. Besides, how could he say no now when your marriage has been set since you were both babies?”

Milly snickered and rolled her eyes again when Charlotte’s jaw dropped in shock, giving us a clear view of her tonsils at the back of her throat. Tana and I stared at each other with wide, disbelieving eyes, struggling not to burst into loud laughter.

If Charlotte wasn’t so insufferable, I would almost feel bad for her.

Almost.

Before Charlotte could refuse what we all knew to be the truth, the door opened to reveal a very happy Tristian. He greeted Jane’s mother politely and chuckled at the sight of us all before he excused himself and slipped away.

“Jane?” Her mother called out, rushing to take her daughter’s hands. “What happened? Why did Tristian want to talk alone with you?” She asked, visibly holding her breath, just like the rest of us.

“Tristian proposed to me,” Jane whispered in a small voice and pulled her mother in for a tight hug.

Jane didn’t need to say anything for us to figure out that she had said yes. The happiness and excitement that rolled off her in waves was answer enough.

Tana and I were happy for Jane and relayed our congratulations when she came over to hug us both. Millie was crabby and stood off to the sideline, jealous over the fact that she hadn’t been the woman Tristian had proposed to. I was tempted to tell her that she could set her sights back on Luke–the very man that she claimed to have moved on from once it became known that Luke and I were courting.

Hopefully, now some of the attention could shift off Luke and me. I hoped that Jane and Tristian would become the talk of the town, but I also feared all of this would backfire.

As happy as I was for Jane–I was absolutely ecstatic for my friend as not only had she set her eyes on Tristian from the very beginning, but I knew she had genuine feelings for him–I feared that Tristian's proposal would have a domino effect and send Luke down on one knee in front of me sooner than I previously feared.

The mental image put a dry, sour taste in my mouth.

What was I going to tell Beast?

Chapter Twenty-Four

After lunch at Jane's hut, I walked back to my own hoping that my mother hadn't already heard the news of Jane and Tristian's engagement. She had already been driving me crazy this past week, pushing me to give Luke a chance and encourage his affection. Once she found out about this proposal, I was scared of what she would do.

"Did you hear?" My mother rushed to ask me as soon as I returned. "What am I talking about? Of course, you know already that Tristian has proposed to Jane!"

"Yes, I know, mother," I told her, unable to keep the smile off my face even though I already knew what Jane's happy news would mean for myself in the coming days.

"Tell me all about it." She demanded, taking my hands and leading me over to the bed. It wasn't often that my mother wanted to have a conversation with me. It was even less that she wanted to talk to me about something that wasn't about washing clothes, marriage, or village gossip.

"When I arrived, everyone was standing outside the hut, and Jane's mother had her ear pressed up against the door. I didn't know what was going on until Tristian opened the door to leave."

"Tristian was proposing to Jane, that's what was going on!" Mother grinned in all her excitement, beating me to it.

"Yes. Tristian literally had to swim his way through the sea of women to get out of the hut." I chuckled. "Jane came out and showed us her ring. It was Tristian's grandmother's ring. She told us how he got down on one knee and said it was love at first sight for him."

“That’s so romantic!” My mother gushed, and I could see literal love hearts in her eyes. “You’ll be next, Renalia. Now that Tristian has bitten the bullet and snagged himself a wife, Luke and Dean won’t be far behind. I have my suspicions that Dean has his eyes set on your friend Tana even though they haven’t publicly announced their courtship, but of course, that’s none of our concern. As long as Luke gets down on one knee for you, I don’t care about anything else.”

“Oh, can we please not start on this again?” I groaned and moved to lay back on the bed, pressing my hands over my eyes. “You’re putting so much pressure on me.”

“How is this pressure on you?” She snorted in question. “You’re not the one expected to propose. Frankly, I feel sorry for Luke and Dean. All eyes are on them now. They’re the ones under pressure. Not you.”

My mother had a point, but I refused to see it. How could I feel sorry for Luke and Dean when I was too busy feeling sorry for myself? Not only was I currently being courted by a man that I had no interest in, but the man that I was actually interested in was nowhere to be seen.

“I’ve already told you time and time again that I don’t want to marry Luke. I don’t like him, mother. I didn’t even want to court him in the first place.”

“What does it matter whether you like your husband or not?” She stared at me like I had suddenly grown two heads.

“That’s absurd.” I huffed. “That’s why people get married. Because they like someone and want to spend the rest of their life with them.”

“Not everyone lives in dreamland, Renalia.”

“I don’t care what you say. I’m not going to marry Luke.” My words were forceful and determined. Stubborn.

“We’ll see about that.” My mother narrowed her eyes at me, looking just as stubborn as I was. “Now, stop being lazy and get up. Just because you don’t have clothes to wash anymore doesn’t mean you don’t have any other work.”

I groaned but listened. My mother seemed to have dropped the subject of Luke and marriage for now, but I knew it wouldn’t be long until she brought it up again.

Later that night, I lay in silence as I pondered what I was going to do about Beast.

I hadn’t seen him in over a week despite going out to the forest in search of him every night. I wanted to tell him how Luke was practically being pushed on me with the courtship and impending marriage proposal, but he was avoiding me like the plague. My lips tugged down in a frown at the thought.

The last time we were together, he helped me wash clothes before he was forced to leave when Jane and Tana showed up. I talked with the girls, and when they left, I called out for him, but he was already gone.

I replayed that day over in my head, trying to pinpoint the exact moment when things had gone wrong, but came up with nothing.

Washing clothes. The girls. Talking about Luke. Looking for Beast after they left.

My eyes widened in the dark as understanding dawned on me.

Had he overheard Jane and Tana discussing Luke?

Despite him avoiding me every day this past week, I knew he had been watching me. I felt his eyes on me when I was out in the forest–that was what kept me going back there every night and assured me that nothing bad had happened to him–or walked around Stowe during the day. It was difficult to continue living life normally when it felt like my heart was breaking a little more with each passing second at the unwanted distance between us. It was even more difficult having to deal with this whole Luke mess without being able to run into Beast’s arms every night.

Could Beast be jealous?

Yes.

Yes, he was. Now that I thought about it, it made perfect sense!

If Beast hadn’t been avoiding me like I was ridden with a contagious disease, then he would know that I had no interest in Luke and was actively trying to come up with a way to free myself of any and all association with him.

Marriage wasn’t important. Spending the rest of my life with the man I loved was. That was Beast. Not Luke. But with my mother and Luke set in their ways and Beast determined never to see me again, it was proving difficult.

I didn’t even know if creatures like Beast got married! Or even if they understood what the concept of marriage meant!

Mating, sure, but marriage? I had absolutely no idea.

With all these rushing thoughts clouding my mind, there was no way that I would be able to sleep tonight. Just like every other night this past week. I could probably count on both hands how many hours of sleep I got this past week.

Once I was convinced that my mother was fast asleep, I slipped out of bed. Throwing a thin cardigan over my shoulder to keep me warm because if tonight was going to be like every other night this past week, and I had a feeling it would be, I would be stuck out there until sleep threatened to consume me, I headed out of the hut and began toward the forest in the darkness of the night.

I didn't care what it would take. I didn't care if I needed to spend the whole night in the forest, and my mother awoke in the morning to find me missing. I had reached the end of my tether and now, there was no way I was leaving without speaking to Beast.

His eyes were on me the moment I stepped out of the hut, but I couldn't make them out through the trees. He was hiding again.

Each step toward the forest had me trying to conjure how to get his attention. How I could get Beast to talk to me? All of this could be resolved if we had a simple conversation, but first, I needed to lure him out.

And I had the perfect idea in mind to do just that.

What I had in mind was a bold move. There was no guarantee that it would work. If it didn't, then I would have made a fool of myself, but I was willing to take that risk.

For Beast, I was willing to do that and so much more.

Sucking in a sharp breath, and with his eyes still on me, my nimble fingers unfastened the buttons of my cardigan. The thin material tumbled off my shoulders and fell to the ground. My dress quickly followed, leaving me in nothing but my panties.

My nipples hardened under the cold wind. I was shivering, and my hair kept flying into my face, but I refused to give up now. Not when I risked possibly losing the most important person to me over a simple misunderstanding.

I held my breath and sent up a small prayer as I slipped my fingers under the sides of my panties, slowly pulling them down my legs. My eyes followed the movement of the material, gliding down my knees and calves

before dropping to the ground at my feet. I kicked them to the side with the rest of my discarded clothes.

When I looked up, there was an angry creature standing in front of me. He looked even angrier when he transformed into his human form, equally as naked as me.

At least now we were on the same wavelength.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"I was wondering when you would finally show up." I frowned, glaring at him. If I didn't glare at him, I didn't know what I would do with myself. I hadn't seen Beast for a whole week, and I was frustrated, upset, angry and confused beyond my understanding.

Beast had a deep scowl on his face even before he transformed into his human, and it was starting to annoy me.

"I've been waiting out here for you every night this past week, but you already know that." When Beast didn't say anything, I grew even more annoyed. "I know you've been watching me, Beast. So, what's wrong? Why haven't you been coming to see me?"

Beast refused to meet my eyes but nodded, confirming that my theory was correct.

Beast had been avoiding me.

"Are you going to tell me why you're mad at me? Or are you going to keep ignoring me?" I scowled harshly at him, refusing to soften up until I had gotten the truth out of him. I didn't care that he wasn't human. Regardless of what we were, it wasn't going to work out if we weren't open and honest with each other.

I wasn't surprised when Beast chose silence over answering me.

"What's going on here?" I groaned, throwing my hands up in the air in frustration. "You're going to ignore me when I'm standing naked in front of you right now?" Again, no response. "Beast!" I screeched as loud as my vocal cords would allow, beyond caring at this point of my voice awoke the sleeping village. "Are you being serious right now?"

The entire time, Beast remained silent, and his eyes were downcast, refusing to look at me. I was starting to lose hope, but I couldn't give up. Not when I cared so deeply for him.

The easy thing to do would have been to turn around and cut my losses short. I could tell myself that this was fun while it lasted, but it was never meant to be. He was a creature that lived in the forest, and I was human. We were kidding ourselves trying to make this work in the first place.

But I couldn't do that.

I couldn't turn around and pretend like none of this had happened. Like I had never met Beast in the first place. Not when I had fallen for him. Not when I *loved* him.

Allowing my heart to lead me, I stepped forward until the tips of our toes were touching. Before he could stop me or attempt to escape, I lowered to my knees in front of him. Not allowing him a moment to catch his breath, let alone try and stop me, I leaned forward and took his cock in my mouth. Even while flaccid, he was a mouthful, but it didn't take long until he was hard in my mouth. I only managed to take half of him down my throat but covered the rest with my hands, twisting and turning as I bobbed on his cock, taking him a little deeper each time.

At first, he resisted. His body tensed, but Beast neither moved nor said anything.

I didn't like that.

Determination coursed through my body as I forced myself to take more of him down my throat, sucking hard and swirling my tongue around the underside of his cock as I went. My gag reflex kicked in, but I was relentless as I took more of him in my throat, determined to break the hard wall he was trying so hard to keep up between us.

He wasn't the only one that could be stubborn.

If he thought he would be able to shut me out with silent treatment, then he had another thing coming.

Jerking his cock, I leaned forward and took a heavy ball into my mouth, licking and sucking it. That was all it took to break my Beast, and when a low, guttural groan sounded, I grinned triumphantly.

I teasingly licked his balls once more before pulling away, needing to come up for air, but it appeared that in the process of trying to break down his walls, I had unleashed the beast. Literally.

Beast reached down and fisted my hair, twirling it around his hand. He tugged hard and forced me forward, prodding my lips with his hard, throbbing cock which was still wet from my mouth. I gagged on his cock as my chin brushed against his heavy swinging balls, but Beast refused to let go. My eyes watered and I gagged again, slobbering all over him, but it felt so good. I loved having his cock down my throat. I loved hearing his groans of pressure and having his hands on me, knowing that I made him feel good.

I had really missed this. I had really missed Beast.

He eventually let go of my hair, but I only leaned forward to take more of his mighty cock down my throat. My cheeks hollowed as I sucked and swirled my tongue along the length of him, hungry to taste more of him. The little that I couldn't take down my throat without gagging, I covered with my hands and twisted, jerking him off in my mouth like my life depended on it.

When an especially low, guttural groan met my ears, I stared at him from under my eyelashes. He jerked his hips, forcing himself deeper down my throat and eliminating the use of my hands around the base as all of him was inside me now. He thrust hard, fucking my face like he did my pussy. Like I was his personal fuck toy.

By this point, I was starved for his milky come and fondled his balls to tip him over the edge. Low, throaty groans escaped as he spurted his come into the back of my throat.

When the groans had quietened and his hips finally stilled–no more salty come for me to savour and swallow–I pulled my mouth off his cock, swirling my tongue around the length as I went. Like a good girl, I opened my mouth wide to show him I had swallowed all his seed.

A triumphant grin sat on my face for only a few seconds before the look on Beast's face wiped it away.

"Me Beast. You…pretty flower," Beast groaned and dropped himself to his knees in front of me, uncaring of the cold, hard ground. With his head bowed and his hands fisted in his hair, it broke my heart to see him struggling so much. "Beast monster. Renalia pretty flower. Beast bad. Renalia pretty flower. Not work. Not fix. Not match."

Unable to bear listening to him talk so negatively about himself, I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and guided him to my chest.

“Don’t say that,” I whispered, running my fingers through his dark, unruly hair. “Don’t speak about yourself like that. You’re not a monster.”

“No.” He groaned, furiously shaking his head. “Beast monster. Beast not worthy.”

“You’re more worthy than anyone I know.” I sniffled, blinking back tears. “It breaks my heart that you don’t see it, but you’re so worthy, Beast. You’re the worthiest and most deserving person I know. You’re also the furthest person from a monster that I know. Please, please, please don’t speak about yourself like that. It breaks my heart to hear you say that. I hate hearing you talk about yourself like that.”

“Pretty flower deserve better. Deserve more.” Beast nuzzled his face further into my chest, plastering himself against me as he desperately sought comfort.

“You don’t get to decide that, Beast,” I told him, unable to hold the tears back as I turned my head and pressed it into his hair, inhaling in the scent of him, forever burning it into memory. “You don’t get to decide what I deserve or don’t deserve. This is my choice, and I choose you. Always. The sooner you understand that the better because I’m not going anywhere without you.” I paused, pressing several kisses into his hair, unable to put a tap on my emotions as they poured out of me. Much like my tears. “And don’t for a second think that this is me settling, because it’s not. I want you. Not just today, but forever. If anything, I’m the one that’s not worthy of you.”

I love you.

I’ve never experienced true love before, but I love you.

I’ll never love another even remotely close to the way I love you.

“Renalia need human.” Beast continued like the stubborn creature that he was. “Beast no good. Beast bad. Beast monster.”

“I already told you. I never want to hear you speak about yourself like that again,” I warned him, furiously wiping away both our tears. Bowing my head, I pressed a soft kiss to his forehead.

“Beast–”

I knew I was only distracting the situation, momentarily pausing it, doing both of us no good, but I couldn’t stand to hear him put himself down like this any longer. I couldn’t stand to see him so sad and broken.

Pushing him onto his back, I gave Beast no time to gather his thoughts as I bowed my head and sucked the tip of his cock back into my mouth. He

tried to push me off him at first, but when I dropped myself lower, taking more of him down my throat until my nose pressed into his pelvis and my chin brushed against his balls, he groaned and succumbed to the pleasure.

In this moment, I wasn't just sucking his cock. I was sucking out the pain and conflicting emotions he was struggling to deal with. Not only that, but I was also apologising for all the pain and sorrow that had come from this huge misunderstanding. I was also apologising for my courtship with Luke that I had been forced into. Regardless, I knew I needed to talk to Beast about it, but I couldn't do it now. Not when he was like this. Not when he was so vulnerable already.

I sincerely wished that things were different. I wished I could go back to that moment in the chief's hut and say no in front of everyone before my mother had the chance to answer for me. Maybe then I wouldn't be in this messy situation–pun not intended.

Instead, I sucked harder on Beast's cock, desperately trying to give him the release and relief he so badly needed. When his come spurted and hit the back of my throat for the second time tonight, forcing my head down on him harder as he rode out the waves of his orgasm, I slurped and swallowed everything he gave me.

"Talk." Beast barked at me as he came down from the high. "We talk."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Even though Beast was the one who suggested we talk, he refused to talk to me.

Every time I tried to say something, he nipped at my throat, demanding I stay quiet. I wasn't happy about it, but there wasn't much else that I could do. I tried to go down on him for a third time to see if it would work, but Beast saw it coming and stopped before my sneaky hands could get past his chest.

A deep growl sounded in warning as he took a step back.

"Where are you going?" I asked, my tone laced with panic as I watched him put distance between us. "You said you wanted to talk, so let's talk."

Instead of answering me, Beast transformed and gathered my clothes in his snout. I couldn't bring myself to care about all the animal slobber as I threw my leg over his back and climbed on top of him, rubbing my wet, dripping pussy all over his fur.

Instead of taking me into a clearing, or the field of flowers like last time, he took us back to where it all started.

His cave.

Nothing much had changed since I had last been here. Well, nothing other than my blanket which was folded neatly in the corner.

I settled against the wall of the cave–still naked. Gnawing on my bottom lip, I watched intently as the muscles of his back flexed as he worked on a fire to keep us warm. His forehead creased in frustration between his eyebrows as a gentle gust of wind slipped into the cave and kept blowing out his efforts. When he moved around to block it to protect

the fire, I couldn't help but admire his strong will and fighting attitude. And I wasn't just talking about the fire here.

Though it did sadden me that the same stubborn and determined attitude hadn't been applied when it came to me.

It hurt that Beast was ready to give me up so easily.

Once he managed to get the fire going, Beast dropped himself on the ground next to me and threw the blanket over us both. Even though I was supposed to be mad at him, I couldn't resist snuggling into his side, seeking the warmth and comfort I knew only he could provide. His body stiffened at first, but it melted away as he curled his arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer.

A relaxed sigh escaped me.

I missed this. I missed Beast more than I realised, and I would be damned if I ever let anything, or anyone, get in the middle of this–us–ever again. That included ourselves, so whatever issues we had, neither of us were leaving the cave until they were dealt with. I didn't care if that meant my mother would wake up to find me missing. I was willing to spend however long it took until Beast was convinced that we were meant to be together.

Because we were. and there was nothing anyone could say or do to change my mind. Even him.

Beast was mine.

"Talk now." He demanded.

"Why have you been avoiding me this past week?" I asked, not wasting any time with the hard-hitting questions. "What did I do wrong? What did I do for you to push me away?" When Beast didn't answer, his face a mask of hesitation, my bottom lip trembled.

I hated how pathetic and weak I felt, but I couldn't help it. I hated how emotional his silence was making me. Beast had quickly become the most important person in my life, the reason I woke up in the morning–so I could sneak out to see him every night–and this past week without him had been nothing short of my worst nightmare.

"Why are you mad at me?" I sniffled and turned my head so he wouldn't see the two lone tears that dripped down both cheeks. I was quick to wipe them away.

I wasn't here to make Beast feel bad or berate him for disappearing on me. I was here to find the root of the problem so we could fix it.

Because I *needed* to fix things with him.

I didn't know what I would do without him in my life anymore. I didn't know how I would go on.

My life had been so bleak, dull, and miserable before Beast. That very night he knocked me off my feet and dragged me back to his cave before proceeding to devour me, there was no going back for me. Ever.

"Beast not mad. Not mad…pretty flower." He denied, shaking his head gently. As convincing as it was–not–there was one fatal flaw. He wouldn't meet my eyes.

"Don't lie to me, Beast." I cupped his cheek, turning his head to face me. "Please tell me what I did wrong so I can fix it."

"Pretty flower…no fix." The frustrated, tormented look in his eyes killed me. I knew there was so much he wanted to say but struggled to express himself in a way that I would understand. "Nothing…fix," he forced himself to continue. I had never loathed being human so much before. "Beast sorry."

"What are you sorry for, Beast? You have nothing to be sorry for. All of this is my fault."

"I–" He began but cut himself off, clamping his mouth shut and growling quietly under his breath. "Renalia no–" He caught himself again, growing even more frustrated.

Beast didn't attempt for a third time. Instead, he buried his face in his hands and roared loudly from deep within his chest. Even the fire flickered at the magnitude of the sound.

Roar after roar escaped him as his hands slid up and fisted his hair, pulling harshly on the ends. His grip was so tight and his hands so heavy I feared he would pull out his hair in clumps.

It killed me to see him like this. To see him so hurt and broken.

"Beast." I cooed quietly and reached up to take his hands in mine, gently pulling them away from his hair. "Don't do that to yourself, Beast," I whispered, moving his hands to cup his face, forcing him to look at me. "I hate seeing you beat yourself up like this, Beast. It kills me to see you struggling like this."

"Renalia. Pretty flower." Beast whimpered, his hands as he cupped my face. "Beast sorry…very sorry."

"You don't have anything to apologise for, Beast," I assured him, blinking back tears.

I leaned up to press my forehead against Beast's, nudging the tip of my nose against his. My thumb stroked his cheek, pouring all my love for him into that one simple action. It felt like Beast was staring into my soul, his eyes dark and unwavering. He must have eventually found whatever he was searching for as he dropped his hands from my face to my hips. He squeezed tightly and lifted me onto his lap, cradling me against his chest as he draped the blanket over us once again.

"I hate to see you hurting, Beast," I whispered the words into his chest, my arms wrapped tightly around his waist.

Beast exhaled a shaky breath and pressed a kiss to my hair, a featherlight touch. One hand rested on my hip while the other cradled the back of my head, holding me close. As if he was deathly afraid that I would disappear at any moment.

"Beast very sorry." He whispered the apology against my forehead, peppering the skin there with the softest of kisses. "Beast not human."

My breath hitched, but I dared not move. The last thing I wanted was for him to think I was pulling away.

"Take all the time you need." I pressed a kiss to his left pectoral, my hands running up and down his back soothingly. "There's no rush. I have all the time in the world for you."

"Luke." Beast spat, his lips tugging down into a deep scowl, his hold tightening on me ever so slightly. "Luke human. Renalia human. Beast… beast." He continued to protest, and despite how heavy the uncertainty of the situation had weighed on my mind this past week, I couldn't help but chuckle at the petulant, childish pout on his face.

It was terrible timing, but the expression was so endearing that I took a mental snapshot of it.

"Let me guess, do the math?" I snickered, and then laughed even louder when he scowled at me.

"Beast watch…Renalia and Luke." Beast growled, a dark, frightening expression taking over his face as he stared ahead, refusing to look at me. He subconsciously fisted his hand so tight in my hair that I risked losing more than a few strands if I tried pulling away now. Not that I would ever dream of it. "Luke loves Renalia."

My theory was correct. Beast had been watching from the forest, and he was jealous. Over Luke. Jealous over a man that meant nothing to me. A man that was nothing but a nuisance in my life.

“Luke doesn’t love me.” I was quick to deny it, unable to believe it for even a second. Sure, I believed Luke liked me enough to propose courtship, but he couldn’t love me. And if he did, it didn’t matter because it would be completely one-sided.

“Luke loves Renalia. Luke want pretty flower.” Beast continued to grumble, refusing to listen to me. “Renalia…” His jaw clenched tightly as his voice trailed off. “Renalia…loves…Luke.” A pained expression took over his face as if it hurt him to physically say those words.

“I do not love Luke!” I stared up at Beast with wide eyes. “I can only imagine how bad things must look, but I don’t love Luke. Not now, not ever.”

“Luke propose.”

“Luke hasn’t proposed. We’re currently courting, but you have to believe me when I say that it’s completely one-sided. My mother agreed to the courtship before I could say anything.” I explained. “And even if he does propose, I don’t care. My answer will be no, and there’s nothing he can do to change that. I don’t love Luke, and I certainly don’t want to marry him.”

Beast’s eyebrows furrowed together as he stared down at me, hardly blinking. I knew that his mind was reeling right now, and I needed to lay all my cards out on the table before things spiralled out of control.

Even if this was all we could ever be, Beast and his pretty flower, secretly meeting in the forest every night, it was far more meaningful than anything I could have with Luke, or any other man, for that matter.

No one would mean as much to me as this creature in front of me did.

I could never love another like how I loved Beast.

“I need you to listen to me carefully, okay, Beast?” I told him, needing him to believe me. “I am not interested in Luke in the slightest. He asked me to court him in front of the chief and chiefess, his friends, and my mother. Before I could turn him down, my mother jumped in and agreed to it even though I’d told her time and time again that I don’t like Luke. She has her mind set on me marrying him so she can ship me off to Scotland, but that’s the last thing I want. I don’t want to marry him, and I don’t want to leave you. Ever.” Beast nodded, hanging off my every word, and I rewarded him with a soft, chaste kiss on his unsuspecting mouth. “I’m so sorry that you’ve had to watch all of this unfold and not know what’s going on. I’m sorry I haven’t had the chance to tell you the truth until

now.” I pressed a kiss to his strong chin. “I promise you with my whole heart that I don’t love Luke. I don’t even like him. The only time I speak to him is when my mother forces me. If he proposes to me, I’m going to say no, but he should have the hint by now. I could never accept him as my husband.”

I can’t accept anyone but you as my husband, Beast. Only you.

I wasn’t delusional. I knew my relationship with Beast was atypical, but it was the happiest I had ever been. Not many were lucky enough to experience love from a life partner. I was worse off because I had never experienced the love of a parent, either, but Beast has changed all of that.

He had made me fall in love with him.

Unfortunately, things weren’t going to be black and white for us. Being with Beast, truly being with him in every sense of the word, meant that I would need to leave everything behind–my mother and the only place I had ever called home–but I would do it a million times over.

Anything to be with Beast.

Anything to be with the love of my life.

It didn’t matter that I still didn’t know what Beast was or where he came from. It didn’t matter that he was part human, part creature, and could transform between the two quicker than the drop of a hat. It didn’t matter that I didn’t know what the future held for us both.

None of that mattered to me. All that mattered was that I loved him.

“Beast.” I exhaled his name, overcome with this overwhelming need to tell him the truth. To confess. “I love you, Beast.”

Beast blinked in stunned silence as he stared at me with wide eyes, unmoving. It was worrying that I had proclaimed my love for him, and he still had yet to say anything.

He also had yet to breathe.

“Beast? What are you doing?” I called out to him, my voice laced with worry. “You have got to breathe!”

It was like my frantic words had breathed life into him. Beast inhaled sharply, his eyes growing wider, and I watched as his chest moved up and down rapidly, working hard to regulate his breath.

“Pretty flower…love…Beast?” He whispered in the smallest of choked voices, so quiet that I strained my ears and could still barely hear him. I watched in awe, incredibly moved as he placed his hand over his chest, almost as if checking if his heart was still beating. “Renalia love Beast?”

It both saddened me immensely and relieved me to know that he was so affected by my proclamation of love. I didn't need to hear it from Beast to know he loved me. I felt his love through every look, every touch, and every action. I had known for a long time, but I still wanted to hear it.

"Yes." I grinned and nodded, my voice sounding just as choked with need as I became overwhelmed with immense love for this man. "I love you, Beast. My love for you is so great that it scares me. Even thinking of a life where I don't spend every day by your side terrifies me. I can't do it. I can't live without you."

"Beast love pretty flower." Beast grinned widely, enveloping me in his arms and pulling me flush against his chest. He caged me in with no room to escape, but I couldn't ever fathom complaining about such bliss.

I didn't ever want to be anywhere else.

I loved Beast, and Beast loved me. That was all that mattered.

That was all that would ever matter.

"Beast turn," Beast growled as he ripped the blanket off us and pushed me onto my back.

When I saw the look in his eyes–dark, hungry, and animalistic, for *me*–I gulped and beckoned him closer with open arms. And legs.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Beast towered over me and pried my legs apart. I whimpered as he lowered himself between them, pressing his body against mine. The feel of his naked body against mine, his heart thumping against my chest, and his breath fanning over my face was nothing short of wickedly delicious, and I could hardly hold myself back when he bowed his head to claim my lips with his own.

The kiss was hard, feral, and did sinful things to my body. I writhed and squirmed under the delicious weight of him, getting drunk off the taste of him. My hand travelled between our bodies, reaching for his hard cock that was already leaking precum all over my stomach.

“Beast.” I moaned into his mouth, winding an arm around his neck to pull him closer while I pumped his cock. “I need you inside me, Beast. Please.” I begged, desperate for his large, throbbing cock that my greedy pussy salivated for.

Beast and his cock had ruined me and my pussy for all other men.

“Pretty flower. Most pretty.” Beast panted against my mouth, his hips rocking back and forth as I jerked his shaft.

“Beast,” I groaned again. “Please. Fuck. Me.” I demanded between kisses, arching my back to rub my boobs against his chest, desperate for friction.

“Renalia want fucking?” He growled against my mouth, nipping harshly on my bottom lip before soothing the sting with a swipe of his tongue. The feeling went straight to my pussy which clenched tightly, desperate for something big and hard to squeeze around. And I knew Beast had just the thing.

Beast licked a long stripe down the column of my neck, sending a shiver down my spine. He kissed and sucked his way over my collarbones, over the swells of my boobs and finally, my hard nipples that ached for his mouth. He gave each a teasing, tender lick before his mouth continued to travel down until he reached my throbbing clit. He rewarded it with a kiss, and I almost came undone then and there.

His broad shoulders forced my legs apart to accommodate him, and I reached down to fist his hair, pressing his face further into my pussy and holding him there. My hips moved on their own accord as I ground my pussy against his face, needing more from him.

“That feels so good.” I whimpered, my pussy already creaming for him.

Beast sucked my clit into his mouth and slipped two fingers inside me, finally filling it up with something. It wasn’t quite as girthy or long as his cock, but my toes curled nonetheless. His palm slapped against my pussy lips and clit with each thrust, and I arched my back and palmed my boobs as the fire in my stomach grew, threatening to burn me from the inside. There wasn’t much else that I could take, and when Beast slipped his tongue inside my pussy to join his fingers, my eyes squeezed shut, and I saw stars on the back of my eyelids. I came long and hard on his fingers and tongue, and he turned me into a whimpering, moaning mess as he cleaned me up.

Wiping one last stripe from my seeping hole all the way up to my throbbing clit, teasingly nibbling on it and making me moan loudly, Beast towered over me once again.

“Like?” Beast grinned menacingly at me, full of confidence and with my juices smeared over his mouth and chin.

“I liked that a lot.” I panted, my body still riding the aftershocks of the powerful orgasm he had given me.

I didn’t have time to come down from the high as Beast flipped me onto my stomach. I groaned in anticipation and lifted my ass for him, tempting him by shaking it in his face.

“What are you waiting for, Beast?” I groaned in frustration when he didn’t immediately thrust his thick, girthy cock inside me, glaring at him from over my shoulder. “Hurry up and get inside of me. I haven’t had you for so long. I can’t wait any longer.”

“Two holes,” Beast growled, pumping his cock as he stared at my ass. The dark, hungry look in his eyes turned me on even more, and my pussy clenched in anticipation, needing something thicker than his fingers to fill me this time.

“I don’t care,” I told him, surprising even myself. “But put your cock in my pussy and get it wet first. You can have a shot at my ass next.”

“Pussy. Ass.” Beast chanted, licking his lips in anticipation.

The promise of my tight asshole wrapping around his cock for the first time was the final push he needed to thrust forward and bury himself inside me, going deeper than I had ever felt him before.

“Good pussy.” He groaned as he pulled out and slammed back in, his heavy balls slapping against my slick clit. “Pretty flower. Pretty pussy.” He moaned, his hips speeding up. “Love Renalia. Love pussy.”

If Beast wasn’t balls deep inside of me right now, giving me the most inside pleasure I had ever felt before, I would have laughed at the fact that he sounded like he was in a trance. Instead, I pressed my forehead into the blanket and arched my back to feel him deeper inside me.

“You feel so good inside me.” I moaned, squeezing my eyes shut as I thrust my hips back, meeting him halfway.

Nothing had ever felt this good before. My pussy seemed to agree as not even a moment later, it clenched tightly around his cock before coming all over him, squelching loudly as he continued thrusting into me through my orgasm, drawing it out.

“Ass?” Beast groaned, and in all his excitement, he pulled out of me and began nudging my forbidden hole with the bulbous head, wet with my come.

“Yes.” I groaned, my pussy still quivering.

The shivers only intensified as he pulled apart my ass cheeks and gently nudged the puckered hole with the thick tip of his cock. I braced myself for the pain, hopeful that it wouldn’t hurt as much as my pussy did when he broke it in for the first time, but I was quickly proven wrong.

A painful yelp escaped me as he only slipped the tip into my virgin asshole, going against all his animalistic instincts. It was sweet of him, especially because I knew it demanded a great deal of restraint on his side, but the pain was a little too intense for me to appreciate right now.

“Slowly.” I groaned, squeezing my eyes shut as I fisted the blanket. “You’re so big. It’s not going to go all the way in straight away. You have

to go slow. Break me in."

"Slowly," Beast repeated, stilling his hips completely as he allowed me to take the lead. "Ass…slowly. Break…in."

Not wanting to throw in the towel this early, I inhaled sharply before pushing myself back on him, trying to take a little bit more of him in my ass. When a sharp sting struck me, I groaned in pain and pulled myself off him. It didn't sting nearly as much as it did moments before, but it still felt like I could feel him inside me.

"Stop?" Beast asked, his voice dripping in concern. "Hurt?"

"No." I shook my head, determined to give it another go. All we had to do was get past the initial pain, and then the rest would be smooth sailing. "Let me just try the tip this time," I told him, reaching behind to grasp his cock and line it up with my puckered asshole once again.

It hurt just as much as before, and I winced with each slow, laboured breath. The quiet gasps were replaced with needy whimpers when Beast reached underneath and thumbed my clit. My body jerked at the pleasure that surged through me, and I moaned loudly, momentarily forgetting that I had his cock inside my ass right now. In my sudden movements, I thrust back and took another inch of his cock, unable to focus on anything but the pleasure he was giving me.

"Better?" Beast asked quietly as he flicked my clit and simultaneously slipped a finger inside my pussy. One finger quickly turned into two and then three. With pleasure coursing through my body, I pushed back and took more of his fat cock inside me without feeling like he was tearing up my ass.

"Better," I groaned, still going with the slow thrusts.

As this was my first time trying anal, the pain started to become unbearable after a short while. Before I could push Beast away and suggest that we try again another time, maybe in the water so we'd be more lubricated, he added a fourth finger into my pussy and slammed the palm of his hand against my clit. He continued this even when he pulled his cock out of my ass, reading my mind.

"Next time." He promised me, gently probing my other hole as he replaced his fingers in my pussy with his cock.

I moaned at the sensation of being full once again, but Beast didn't give me a moment to savour it as he pressed down on my lower back, forcing me to arch more as he pumped in and out of me.

I didn’t doubt for a second that this was Beast claiming me. That this was his way of reminding me that I belonged to him. That he had chosen me as his mate. That he never planned to give me up.

I knew that he was allowing his jealousy to rule him, to spur him on as he thrust harder and harder into me each time, but I wasn’t about to complain. Not when he had a hand between my legs and was furiously rubbing my clit, pushing me over the edge of yet another powerful orgasm.

“Beast!” I mewled as I came hard on his cock, my pussy walls clenching tightly around him, desperate to feel him shooting his milky come deep inside me.

His breathing grew loud and erratic, and his thrusts became harder and sloppier, close to reaching his peak as well. And when he did, thrusting deep into me as he came and painted my pussy walls white with his milky come, grunting and groaning, I moaned and came around his cock once again, the pleasure far too much to bear.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I had never returned so late in the morning before. The clear blue sky was enough to tell me that my mother was already awake and no doubt pacing in front of the hut, waiting to kill me when I eventually returned home.

That thought had me gulping in fear, and I pushed myself to walk faster.

The rogue thought of not returning home–of never having to face my mother's wrath again–played on my mind. I could return to the forest and run away with Beast. We could start a new life together. We could be happy together without the fear of my mother or any other villagers catching us. We would finally be free to embrace us. Free to live as we wanted. Love as we wanted.

My feet grew heavier with each step away from the forest, but eventually, I found myself in front of the hut and surprisingly, my mother was nowhere to be seen.

Was it possible that she wasn't home? Or was she waiting inside for me? It would be much easier to clean up blood in the privacy of our hut. Yes, that had to be it.

I held my breath as I cautiously opened the door, peering in. My eyes widened in a mix of surprise and fear as I spotted her standing in front of the mirror, calmly brushing her hair. As if nothing was wrong. As if she didn't know that I had been missing all night.

"I was wondering when you would get home." My mother murmured, her eyes trained on her reflection as she brushed her hair. "How was your walk?"

“It was nice,” I answered quietly, cautiously stepping in and closing the door behind me. “How long have you been awake?”

“A while.” She told me. “I was angry at first. I thought you snuck out to the forest again, but then I realised that you were probably out for a walk with Luke. I know the two of you have been getting more serious lately, so it makes sense.”

“Yes, that’s it.” I gulped, hating that Luke was a part of the lie. “I went for a morning walk with Luke.”

“You could have at least changed into something more flattering.” She sighed, sending me a disapproving look through the mirror when I reached to select a dress to get changed into for the day.

“You’re right. I should have changed into something nicer. My mistake.” I was quick to apologise as I got dressed, my actions slow. My asshole was stinging this morning after playing with Beast last night, and I was hoping for some time alone for a hot wash to ease the soreness.

“Luke shouldn’t see you in your nightdress until you’re married.” My mother clicked her tongue.

I was in a lot less last night, but Luke didn’t see me.

“Sorry. It won’t happen again.”

I had arrived so late that my mother had already baked bread for breakfast this morning. I kept my head down, hiding my eyes–the lies and concealed truth–from my mother as I helped myself to a slice of bread and slathered a thick layer of jam onto it.

My mother could never know the truth. I couldn’t tell her that I wasn’t out on a walk this morning. I couldn’t tell her I had been out in the woods all night, sleeping naked in a cave after making up with the love of my life.

“Don’t get me wrong,” she began, ignoring my apology. “I’m happy that the two of you are getting along so well. In fact, I’m relieved that you’re finally starting to give in and give Luke a chance, especially since everybody knows that he’s going to propose to you any day now, but you need to keep things proper until they’re official.”

Before I could respond, a knock sounded on the door, and I exhaled in relief. Saved by the bell.

“I’ll get that,” I told my mother as I rushed over to open the door, and due to her sudden speech on propriety, I made sure that all the buttons on

my dress were fastened. As soon as I saw who was on the other side of it, I wished I had never opened it in the first place.

Luke.

“What are you doing here?” I gaped at him with wide, disbelieving eyes.

This wasn’t good. This wasn’t good at all.

It wasn’t his being here that worried me. It was his being here after my mother assumed I had been out on a walk with him this morning that worried me. I feared what she would do to me if she found out the truth.

“I was hoping that we could go for a walk. Maybe talk a little.” Luke grinned at me, glancing over my shoulder to wave at my mother. Against my better instincts, I followed his gaze over my shoulder and spied the solemn expression on her face, accompanied by a dark look in her eyes. One which told me that I would be in an immeasurable amount of trouble as soon as Luke left. “Is now a good time? Or should I come back later?”

“Now’s a great time.” I nodded frantically.

I didn’t stick around to hear what my mother had to say to me as I grabbed the same cardigan from last night and rushed out the door, pushing Luke down the path and away from the hut.

I was safe. For now.

“Tell me the truth,” Luke began. “Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Why do you ask?”

“Maya looked furious.” He chuckled.

“That’s nothing new.” I waved it off with a dismissive hand. “What prompted you to ask me for a walk this morning?”

“Most people are still in their huts this early in the morning, and besides, I know how much you love morning walks.”

“I do love morning walks,” I murmured, a sinking feeling settling in the pit of my stomach. “Is that the only reason you asked me?”

“My intentions aren’t entirely pure,” Luke admitted, the sweet smile on his face nothing like the menacing way Beast grinned at me.

“No?”

“There was something that I wanted to speak to you about.”

“Oh.” I made a low questioning sound at the back of my throat. “What is it, Luke?”

His smile grew nervous. “I’m assuming you’ve heard about Tristian and Jane?”

“Yes, I was there.” I chuckled nervously, but on the inside, I was kicking myself for being so stupid. I shouldn’t have agreed to this walk. I’d rather deal with my mother’s wrath than have Luke drop to one knee in front of me right now.

“What did you think about it?” Luke asked, visibly gulping as he awaited my response, looking as if he was holding his breath.

“What do you mean?” I asked even though I knew exactly what he meant. What I was really trying to do was buy myself some time to come up with an escape plan.

“What did you think about Tristian proposing to Jane?”

“I thought it was nice.” I shrugged, trying to come across as nonchalant as possible even though I was absolutely elated for my friend. “I know Jane is absolutely over the moon about it. She really likes Tristian.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” He murmured nervously, coming to an abrupt stop which in turn, made me stop, as well. “Was there anything else you thought about it?”

I hesitated, not sure what to say or do to stop the inevitable from happening.

I wasn’t a fool. I knew what Luke was hinting at. I knew why he was asking all those strange questions about Jane and Tristian. I knew he had every intention of doing what my mother had been non-stop talking my ear off about ever since he got here.

If this were Beast, I would be over the moon, jumping on the balls of my feet in excitement and screaming yes a thousand times, however, it wasn’t. Luke couldn’t be further from Beast if he tried.

“Oh, I completely forgot!” I made a show of gasping, really trying to sell the lie. “My mother asked me to help her with something earlier. I should head back and do that, otherwise she’ll get annoyed with me again.”

Disappointment washed over his face, and his shoulders sagged.

“Let me walk you back.” Luke offered, not bothering to hide the sad frown.

“Oh, no. There’s no need. I can walk back by myself. I’m sure you’ve got a busy day ahead of you.” I was quick to say, my feet already moving away from him and toward the hut.

I didn’t care if I was being rude right now. All I cared about was getting away from him before he could do what I feared the most.

If I were brave, I would tell Luke that I didn’t want to marry him. That I didn’t want to court him in the first place. That I would never want to marry him, and there was nothing he, or anyone else, could do to change my mind.

If I were braver, I would tell my mother about Beast.

And if I were even braver, I would run away with him.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"You lied to me." My mother snapped, slamming the door shut as soon as I stepped into the hut, nearly hitting me in the process.

"I didn't lie to you. I merely omitted the truth." I denied, but my voice wavered, giving me away.

"You've always been a liar! Even when you were a child!" She snarled, pointing an accusatory finger at me. "You lied about going for a walk this morning with Luke."

I shook my head, trying not to cower back in fear. My mother looked like she was going to pop a blood vessel.

I didn't say anything to you this morning. You assumed I went for a walk with Luke, and I didn't correct you.

You might call it lying, but I call it saving my own skin.

You would have killed me if I told you the truth.

"What were you doing this morning? Where were you really?" She demanded, her eyes narrowing into slits as she glared at me. "What are you hiding from me?"

So much, but I can't tell you. You'd have a heart attack if you knew the truth.

"I'm not hiding anything from you," I said quietly, my eyes wide as I watched her every move, afraid that she would reach for me at any moment now. It wouldn't be the first time my mother had laid her hands on me. It was common to hit children, but not as common when they grew up and became young adults, but my mother didn't care. She did what she wanted. Including beating me into submission if she needed to. It didn't happen often, mostly because I was always careful of overstepping and

landing myself too far out on her bad side, but it had happened enough times for me to be terribly afraid at times like this.

“Stop lying to me!” She yelled, her eyes furious. “I know you’re lying to me, so don’t try to deny it. You’ve always been a liar, Renalia! Why can’t you ever tell me the truth? Is it so hard?”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, subconsciously taking a step back. “I promise I didn’t mean to lie to you. You just assumed I was out on a morning walk with Luke, and I let you believe it. I figured it wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

“Why did you lie to me?” She persisted, demanding answers.

“I knew you would get mad at me if I told you the truth,” I said quietly and moved to take a seat on the bed because I could sense this conversation would be long. Things were already so heated, and my mother hadn’t even fully started yet.

“I woke up in the morning to find you missing. I assumed you were out for a walk with Luke, but I now know how wrong I was. So, where did you go? And dressed in your nightdress, I might add.”

“I did go for a walk,” I said, unable to meet her eyes. There was no way I could tell her the truth. Not when it put Beast in danger. He had already been through it multiple times before and narrowly escaped each time. In the past, he had always needed to leave once he was found out to save himself. If he was discovered here as well, he would have to leave Stowe. He would have to leave me.

My mother snorted and rolled her eyes. “How stupid do you think I am?”

“I don’t think you’re stupid.”

“You’re lying to me again.”

“I’m not lying.” I lied about lying. “I promise I went for a walk this morning.”

“In the forest?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“With who?” She asked, quirking a questioning brow at me.

“With no one.” I denied. “I went for a walk by myself. Like I always do.”

“I don’t believe you.”

That’s because I’m lying through my teeth right now.

“I don’t know what else to say.” I shrugged, trying to act as nonchalant as possible, desperate to diffuse the situation. “I’m sorry I went for a walk

in the forest when you specifically told me not to. I just love it so much."

I also love the creature that lives in the forest, but I can't tell you that. I can never tell you that.

You'll never understand.

"I don't believe you. You always lie to me." She snorted.

"I don't always lie to you."

I lie to you a lot, but not always.

"You're lying to me right now." She insisted.

"I promise I'm not lying to you right now." Even though I was lying, I forced myself to meet my mother's eyes, hoping it would make me more believable. "I woke up early and couldn't go back to sleep, so I decided to go for a walk. I know you told me to stop doing that, but I don't why you hate it so much. I've always gone for morning walks in the forest."

"You don't normally go out in your nightdress." She pointed out. "And you never come back so late."

"I forgot to change. And I'm sorry for coming back so late. I lost track of time. I didn't mean to worry you."

My mother crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyes. "I know you're lying to me again."

"I'm not lying to you." I groaned and threw my hands up in the air in frustration. "Why can't you just believe me for once?"

"Because I know my daughter well enough to know when she's lying to my face. You're a liar, just like your father." She spat at me, glowering darkly. "Now tell me, who were you out with?"

"You have no right to speak about my father like that." I scoffed.

"Why are you so defensive?" She sneered at me. "It's not like you've ever met him before."

"It's not like you knew him for long either."

I didn't see my mother's hand coming as it cut through the air and slammed against my cheek. The harsh impact sent my head flying to the side. My cheek throbbed, and tears were streaming down my face by the time I turned to glare at her.

"This is your own fault, Renalia." My mother spat, fuming. "You never listen to me and always talk back to me. Don't lie to me again! Was it one of Luke's friends you went out on a walk with? Tristian? Dean?"

"Neither!" I cried, clutching my stinging cheek as I tried to fight back the tears but failed. They continued streaming down my face like a

waterfall, and there wasn't anything I could do to stop it. "I already told you. I went for a walk alone this morning. Why don't you believe me?"

"It's because you've been a liar since the day you were born! You lied about everything, even as a child. I don't even know if you're pure or not."

"What?" I gaped in horror, my cheeks burning harder than when she slapped me.

"You heard what I asked. Don't even think about lying to–"

I cut her off. "How can you even ask me that?"

"Don't try to avoid the question." She chastised me. "Are you pure, Renalia? It's a simple question. It's only a yes or no answer."

"Of course, I'm pure!" I lied, holding my breath the entire time she stared at me, searching my face for any hint of a lie. If my mother suspected I was lying to her now, I would be as good as dead. "How can you even ask me that?"

If only my mother knew that no part of me remained pure. Beast had claimed all my holes, and I didn't regret a single moment of our time together. How could I when I had enjoyed every single part?

My mother held my eyes for the longest time before she sighed. "What have I told you about going for walks in the forest?"

I pursed my lips, not trusting myself to say anything.

"I told you not to! I told you that it would make you look crazy, and then Luke will change hiss mind about proposing to you."

"Luke isn't going to propose to me!" I denied, screeching loudly as I cut her off, unable to deal with this anymore. "And even if he does, I'm going to say no! I didn't want to court him in the first place, and I certainly don't want to marry him. Not now. Not ever!"

"That's it! You are never to go out for walks in the forest again!" My mother demanded, mimicking that of a dictator. "You can't go for a walk in the forest alone or even with someone. And that includes Luke!" I opened my mouth to argue her ridiculous demands, but she wasn't finished barking orders at me. "And don't even think about having sex with Luke before you get married to him. At the very least, wait until you're both engaged. Then, he won't be able to leave you after getting what he really wants."

"Do you hear yourself? You sound crazy!"

"I'm not crazy! What I'm saying is not crazy. It's the truth. I'm just looking out for you, Renalia." She was quick to refute my claims. "I had

sex with your father before we were married, and look what happened to me." She pointed an accusatory finger at me. As if I was the source of all her problems and the bane of her existence. "I got pregnant with you, and you ruined my life! If I didn't get pregnant before marriage, your father would have never left me. I would be a married woman, and my life would be so different right now. I wouldn't have to live in this miserable hut and wash clothes to make ends meet."

"Don't you dare blame your mistakes on me!" I screamed at my mother, unable to listen to her anymore. This was nothing new. My mother had always blamed my father's abandonment on me, but I hadn't even been born. Nor had I asked to be born. "My father leaving you is your problem. Not mine. For Heaven's sake, it happened before I was born! I never even got to meet him!"

"If it weren't for you, he never would have left me!" My mother screamed but little did she know, her words were the tipping point for me.

"I can't believe you right now!" I threw my hands up in the air in frustration, and before my mother could attack again–physically or verbally–I turned around and stormed out of the hut.

My mother had forbidden me from going for a walk in the forest, but she didn't say anything about going to live there. I heard her calling after me, which only made me walk faster until eventually, I broke into a run.

Tears rolled down my face as I ran toward the forest, needing to get away from my mother and everyone else.

Everyone except Beast.

"Beast!" I called out to him as I rushed into the forest in a hysterical state. "Beast, please! I need you!" By this point, I was a blubbering mess and desperate to find the one person who could make me feel better.

Strong, familiar arms wrapped around me before I called out to him for a second time. He guided my face into his chest and held me as I cried my heart out.

What did I ever do to deserve such a mother?

Chapter Thirty

The morning may have started out extremely dreary, looking as if the morbid cloud would rain over my head all day, but things had gotten considerably better.

After Beast kissed away my tears and held me in his arms, ensuring that I had truly calmed down, he took me for a ride. He claimed that he needed to hunt something for lunch, but I suspected that he hoped that a ride on his back would do some good in cheering me up. It did.

The ride came to an end when Beast sensed two rabbits and a chicken nearby. He dropped himself to the ground, and I slid off his back. I followed him and watched as he hunted our lunch, killing the rabbits swiftly. The chicken was a little harder to catch as it was skittish, but Beast slammed his paw on its neck when he grew impatient.

The concept of hunting had always intrigued me, but without a father figure and being of the inferior sex–sarcasm intended–I had never had the chance to observe how hunting worked. Now, I was able to watch it all first-hand. It was more gruesome than I liked, but Beast was kind enough to skilfully conceal those parts from me.

As he had done the hunting, I offered to cook, but Beast refused. He snapped up the catch in his snout and I got on his back. He ran over to the stream we had visited together once before, transformed into his human and lit a fire.

It had been a while since I had tasted chicken. There wasn't much at the feast as it was thought to be inexpensive, and Andrew really wanted to go all out, and my mother and I could hardly afford it on our own. A rabbit and half a chicken were more than I usually ate, sometimes more than I ate

in a couple of days, but Beast was more than happy to finish what I didn't eat.

After lunch, Beast wanted to wash out the animal blood in his fur, and I stripped to join him. As soon as my dress fell to the floor, we ended up getting dirtier than any water could clean.

On the way back to the cave, we made a detour to a different flower field, this one much smaller in size and filled with white lilies, and he picked a small bouquet for me.

It was a little sad to say that today was the best day of my life–one that I would always hold close to my heart.

I had never felt so free and loved before. Never so able to do whatever I wanted, with whomever I wanted. And in this case, it was Beast that I wanted. Not just today. Not just for one day but for every day for the rest of our lives.

Turning over onto my side, I exhaled in relief and snuggled into Beast, watching the gentle rise and fall of his chest as he slept.

He looked rather menacing and scary when he was in his wolf form, like he would pounce on me at any moment, but most of that faded away when he was in his human form. However, there was always something a little feral about him, no matter how sweet and nurturing he was to me. It had considerably dimmed in the short time that I had known him, and I hardly ever noticed it before, but every once in a while, I would notice the feral glint in his eyes again. Even though he had been my rock after the fight with my mother today, the feral glint in his eyes had not once wavered today. I could tell that he was angry, but I could also tell that he was trying to keep it from me. He was angry, but he didn't want me to know that he was angry.

Right now, asleep, was the first moment of the day that Beast looked somewhat peaceful. Though even in his sleep, his arms were wrapped around me as he held me close, protecting me.

Getting to spend the whole day with Beast was one good thing that came from the explosive argument with my mother this morning. I was free to be with Beast in his natural habitat and observe him in his daily routine. I took more joy and comfort in that than I expected.

"What did I do to deserve you?" I exhaled, leaning in to graze my lips across his cheek. "How did I get so lucky to have you in my life?"

"Beast lucky." He whispered, his eyes still closed. "Pretty flower."

“Is that the only reason you keep me around? Because I’m pretty?” I joked, propping my chin up on his chest as I stared at him with a soft, giddy smile. It was impossible not to smile when around Beast. He made me happier than I even knew was possible.

“Love you.” The corner of his lips twitched, sensing the joke in my tone. It appeared that my sarcasm and terrible humour were starting to rub off on him which was a good sign that Beast’s English was improving. He was far more confident with his speech, and he had started stringing along longer sentences, too.

“I love you more,” I grinned.

“No.” He denied, chuckling quietly as he peaked at me from under dark, hooded eyes. “Beast love Renalia more.”

“I’ll let you win this one,” I pouted, leaning in to press a soft kiss to his lips. “Just this once.”

“Hungry?” Beast asked, lifting a hand to tangle his fingers in my hair, somehow able to tame my fiery curls better than I ever could.

“No.” I shook my head and sighed in bliss, turning my head to rest my cheek against his chest. “I was just admiring how peaceful you look when you’re asleep.”

“Peaceful with you.” His sweet words tugged at my heartstrings.

“You have such a beautiful way with words.”

“Pretty flower teach me.”

“Well, I guess I’m a good teacher then.” I grinned, and my eyes fluttered closed when he continued playing with my hair, twirling a few strands around his fingers.

Beast chuckled and leaned up on his elbows to steal a kiss, one which lingered for several seconds too long and awoke my wanton pussy even though he had given it a good pounding today already. He pressed one last kiss to my lips before he lay on his back again and pulled me on top of him, holding me to his chest as a comfortable silence washed over us.

“Miss bad mother?” Beast suddenly asked, playing with my hair.

“What?” I asked in surprise, my lips tugging down in a small frown as I pushed myself into a sitting position to glance down at him. “What makes you think that I would miss my mother?”

“Pretty flower sad.”

“I’m not sad.” Even I wasn’t convinced. “Okay, maybe I am a little sad, but I think that’s expected.” I exhaled deeply. “You should have heard

some of the things she was saying to me this morning. I know she's never liked me before, even when I was a child, but hearing her say that she never wanted me in the first place, that I was a mistake, and ruined her life really hurt."

"Sorry." Beast apologised on behalf of a woman who didn't deserve it, and certainly wouldn't appreciate his kind gesture.

My mother wouldn't be able to look past the fact that Beast wasn't human, and no amount of kindness, sweetness, and gentleness would be enough to convince her of his good nature.

"It's not your fault." I sighed and shook my head, leaning forward to press my forehead into the centre of his chest. "You've made all of this so much easier for me. I loved spending today with you. I've had such a lovely day and haven't thought of my mother and this morning until now."

"Bad mother."

"You can say that again." I chuckled bitterly, struggling to ignore the sour taste in my mouth. "Do you think she's worried about me?" I asked, hating that my insecurities crept into the conversation.

"Yes." Beast nodded, wrapping his arms tightly around me as he pulled me closer. "Bad mother say bad words, but bad mother still mother. Still Renalia mother."

The melancholy tone had me glancing up at him in question. "Beast?"

"No mother for Beast." He murmured, holding me a little tighter. "Angry humans bad. Humans not angry always."

"I know." I groaned quietly, hating that he was right.

"Pretty flower good," Beast assured me, bowing his head to skim his lips against the crown of my head. "Pretty flower best."

"I said some pretty hurtful things as well." I sighed. "But I still think she shouldn't have slapped me. That really hurt."

I sensed the change in Beast the moment the words slipped out of my mouth. His eyes were wide and probing as he stared down at me, as if he couldn't believe his ears. He held me impossibly tight, his fingers digging into my hips.

"Slap?" Beast growled, his chest rumbling against mine as the anger coursed through him. "Bad mother hit Renalia?"

I lifted my head, and a chill ran down my spine as Beast stared at me with pure rage dancing in his eyes, but I knew it wasn't directed at me.

"Yes," I whispered.

“Bad mother hurt pretty flower?” His jaw clenched impossibly tighter, and his eyes flashed gold even though he was in his human form.

“Yes.” I barely nodded. “But it’s fine, Beast. I’m used to it by now. She doesn’t hit me often. Only when I make her really angry. And besides, it doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“Bad mother hurt Renalia.” Beast chuckled darkly, rising into a sitting position and taking me with him. “Beast hurt bad mother.”

“No, Beast! You can’t hurt her.” My eyes widened, and I wrapped my arms around his shoulders in a desperate attempt to keep him in the cave.

“Why?” He grunted, his eyes flashing between gold and dark brown. “She…hurt you.”

“Yes, I know.” I sighed and nodded. “But remember what you said. She might be a mad mother, but she’s still my mother. It will hurt me if you hurt her.”

Beast’s jaw relaxed ever so slightly, and he offered me the smallest of nods. His eyes were still tormented, and his arms remained tight around me as he lowered us to lay on the blanket once again, but he wasn’t out there on a rampage, determined to hurt my mother for hurting me. He pressed his nose against the side of my face, the side that my mother had slapped, nuzzling and kissing my cheek. My body relaxed in his hold, melting in his warm, loving embrace.

It was sad that I protected my mother when all she ever did was hurt me.

Chapter Thirty-One

As much as I didn't want to return to my mother because I was still insanely mad at her, I knew I needed to. I had been away for long enough. That, and Beast was right. My mother probably didn't mean everything she had said to me, and I certainly hadn't meant everything I said.

I was mad at her–I had every right to be–but unfortunately, I couldn't stay mad at her forever.

Beast had offered to come back with me and *warn* my mother not to lay a hand on me again, but I had a feeling that his warning wouldn't include so many words. The offer was endearing, and I appreciated it greatly, but I couldn't risk anyone finding out about him.

My mother just wasn't worth it.

Of course, I would want nothing more than to stay with Beast in his cave in the forest, sharing daily life with him, but two days had passed, and it was now time to return to reality. Every moment out here also risked my mother sending out a search party for me. And I would rather die than risk someone discovering Beast and putting his life in danger. He had suffered enough problems already with humans in the past. He didn't need any more.

With that thought in mind, I inhaled sharply before pushing open the door and letting myself into the hut.

"Mother?" I called out cautiously, gently closing the door behind me.

"Oh, Renalia!" A strained voice called out to me, and the next thing I knew, my mother came barrelling toward me and pulled me into her arms. "I've been going crazy with worry for you. I didn't know when you would

come back. If you would even come back. I'm so sorry for all the horrible things I said to you, Renalia."

Shock crippled me to the extent I didn't know how to react. In all my life, my mother had never embraced me like this. Not even when I was a child.

"You're sorry?" I gaped, staring at my mother in disbelief. I expected to walk into a war zone with my mother waiting around me, thirsty for my blood.

"Yes, I'm so sorry." She sobbed in my arms. "I didn't mean anything I said to you, and I'm sorry for hitting you. I let my anger get the best of me. I wasn't thinking, Renalia. I promise I don't regret having you." She pulled away to stare into my eyes with her watery ones, her need for me to believe her crystal clear.

The shock lasted a few more moments before it wore off, and when it did, I was flooded with overwhelming feelings and emotions.

"I'm sorry, too, mother." I sobbed, my arms finally wrapping around her as I hugged her back. "I also said a lot of things that I shouldn't have and didn't mean. I only said those things because I was angry with you."

"Let's both agree that we said things because we were angry, and not things that we meant them." She gave me an emotional squeeze before pulling away. "Now come on, I made breakfast hoping that you would return today. We can talk while you eat."

"You made me breakfast?" I questioned in surprise, allowing her to lead me to sit where we usually had our meals. My mother only made breakfast when I was too ill to do so or like the other day when I arrived late from the forest.

"I was hopeful that you would come back soon." She admitted with a small, nervous smile as she sat across from me, laying our breakfast between us.

In front of me lay the fanciest breakfast I had ever seen. Not only was the bread not stale, but it had garlic and oil rubbed in and melted all over it. To accompany the fresh, flavourful bread, there was a small block of pungent cheese, some blackberries and my favourite herbal tea to wash it all down with.

"This all looks great." I smiled softly at my mother, taking a sip of my tea.

"I cooked you lunch and dinner yesterday, as well."

“I’m sorry all that food had to go to waste.” I apologised, not feeling nearly as bad as I probably should have. While I now regretted the fight with my mother, I didn’t regret spending two whole days out in the forest with Beast. It was a taster of what our life together would be like, and I absolutely loved it.

“Don’t worry. Luke dropped by yesterday, and he ate a lot of it. We can have the leftovers with our lunch today. The chicken was so succulent.”

“So, you’ve been spending time with Luke?”

My mother shook her head. “He dropped by to have lunch with you the last two days, but of course, you weren’t here. Instead of turning him away, I invited him in, and we had a very awkward lunch.”

I forced a small smile. “That’s nice.”

“He asked about you.”

“He did?” I hummed, not interested in her answer. I couldn’t be more neutral about Luke if I tried. At the very most, he was an annoying acquaintance.

“I told him that Jane needed your help with wedding preparation, and that was keeping you very busy.”

“Thank you for covering for me.”

“Where were you really?”

“In the forest.” I shrugged and helped myself to another slice of bread. Beast would love it. It would have gone wonderfully with the rabbit from yesterday.

“I’m not surprised to hear that, but you spent the entire day and night in the forest?” She asked, looking appalled. Even more so when I nodded. “Where did you sleep?”

“On the ground,” I lied. Technically, I had slept on the ground, but she didn’t need to know about the cave and the familiar blanket she had been looking all over the place this last week. And she certainly didn’t need to know about Beast who held me at night, keeping me warm, safe, and loved. So very much loved.

“You spent the entire night on the ground of the forest?” My mother gaped in disbelief. “I’m so sorry you had to do that! I can’t begin to imagine how cold it must have been. Oh, Renalia!” She exclaimed, really working herself into a frenzy as she continued ranting. “What did you do for food?”

“I mostly ate berries.” I lied, unable to explain the rabbit and chicken I had eaten yesterday. Beast and I had snacked on berries during the day.

“Oh, Renalia!” She gushed, her face a mask of guilt. “Here. Have another slice of bread.” She slid over the last piece to me. “You’ve had such a rough time in the forest. I’m so sorry you felt like you couldn’t come home.”

“I’m sorry, too.” The only thing I regretted yesterday was the horrible fight that I had gotten in with my mother, but if it had never happened, then I never would have been able to spend the entire day with Beast. And I wouldn’t trade in that memory for the entire world. “But that’s in the past now. We don’t need to dwell on it anymore.”

“Thank you.” My mother exhaled in relief, though still looked guilty. “I know that I can be very pushy sometimes, and going forward, I’ll try to back off a little bit, but you have to know that I’m only trying to do what’s best for you.”

“I know.” I sighed, nibbling on the last slice of bread. It was more than I usually ate, but the garlic and olive oil-infused flavouring were almost addictive. “I know you want what’s best for me, but this whole Luke thing needs to stop. I don’t want to marry him, mother. I just can’t.”

The guilt was replaced with annoyance, and she pursed her lips. “Why can’t you marry him?”

“I just can’t.”

“I just want you to have a good life.” She insisted. “A better life than me.”

“I know, mother, and I appreciate that. But I can’t marry Luke. I didn’t even want to court him in the first place.”

My mother pursed her lips, but eventually, she nodded, giving in. She moved to wash the dishes while I helped myself to another cup of herbal tea, surprised by how quickly she gave in. I was half-expecting another explosive argument but was grateful it didn’t happen.

Beast was right. Not everyone was blessed to have family, and regardless of how unconventional and strained my relationship with my mother was, at least I still had a mother. And in some strange, not easily perceivable way, I knew she loved me. It didn’t always feel that way, but she loved me in her own twisted way, and I was lucky to have some form of that.

Beast was definitely the most rational one out of us two.

I smiled at the thought and took another sip of my tea. Beast would love this. He would love to sit with us, enjoying a cup of tea after breakfast.

It was too bad that I would never be able to mention him or our sacred relationship to my mother. She would rather die than hear the truth about my secret life in the forest.

Even though my mother and I still didn't see eye to eye on most things, I was relieved that we were no longer fighting. However, I couldn't help but worry that while she may have let it go for now, she would be back to nagging me about Luke in no time.

My mother's obsession with me marrying Luke was borderline unhealthy, and I feared it would drive us both crazy. Or worse.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I was beyond grateful–and surprised–to say that things had really improved between my mother and me these past few days. We hadn't argued once since I had returned from the forest, and she was nowhere near as unbearable as she usually was.

It appeared that the brief time away from each other had done us some good.

One thing that hadn't changed, unfortunately, was my mother's utmost conviction that Luke was going to propose and we would get married. Something new was Luke dropping by every day to visit us, much to my dismay.

During my short time away, Dean had dropped to one knee for Tana, and now everyone was talking about Luke doing the same. As if there wasn't enough pressure on me already!

"I have a feeling it's going to happen today!" My mother squealed. "There's just something in the air that screams proposal to me!"

Please, no!

"I don't think proposals hang around in the air." I frowned, her words making me feel more nervous than I cared to admit.

"Maybe not literally, but I can just sense it looming." She grinned, far too excited for her own good. "I have a sense for these things. After Tristian proposed to Jane, I knew Dean would propose to Tana. And now, I know Luke is going to propose to you. All three of you could have a joint wedding. Doesn't that sound exciting?"

It sounds like the worst thing that could happen to me.

Like my own personal Hell.

“I thought we talked about this.” I groaned. “You’re being a bit much again.”

“A bit much? I don’t think so.” She frowned, seemingly disappointed with my response, but that was nothing new.

Before my mother could say anything else, a knock sounded on the door.

As I was closest, I moved to open it, but immediately regretted it when I discovered Luke standing on the other side. I was very tempted to slam the door in his face and tell my mother that it must have been the wind that we had heard, but the large grin on his face floored me. And not in a good way.

“Renalia!” Luke grinned widely at me. “I’m glad I managed to catch you before you went for a walk.”

Beast watched me all the time and I loved it. Luke noticed something simple about me, and it made my skin crawl.

“It’s nice to see you, Luke,” I forced a smile, resisting the urge to grind my teeth. “Would you like to come in?” I asked because I knew that if I didn’t, my mother certainly would.

My heart was set on Beast. I had no interest in Luke. Or any other man, for that matter. In fact, I was hoping that I would be able to take advantage of my mother’s good mood today and go for a walk, and then sneak away into the forest for an impromptu meeting with Beast before going to see him again tonight.

“Yes, I would.” He chuckled nervously but made no move to step into the hut.

“Is something wrong?” I asked cautiously.

“I wanted to speak to you about something,” He abruptly told me, his eyes travelling over my shoulder as he glanced into the hut where my mother was no doubt watching us. “In private.”

“Oh, thank you, Lord! This is the moment I’ve been praying for!” My mother exhaled loudly. Before I could say anything to diffuse the situation, she rushed past us both to get out of the hut.

No! No! No. This can’t be happening right now!

“Of course!” My mother answered for me once again. “You can have some privacy in the hut. I’ll go for a walk. You don’t have to worry about me coming back early so take all the time you need. Take all day if you need to. There’s no rush. None at all.”

I tried to call after her, but with the way she was speeding away from us, lifting her skirts and running like her life depended on it, we were literally left in her dust.

“Thank you, Maya.” Luke chuckled his gratitude, but my mother was already gone, running as fast as her little legs would take her. “Can I come in, Renalia?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Luke.” I pursed my lips. “How about we go for a walk of our own?”

He shook his head, not budging from his spot where he blocked the doorway. It was a miracle that my mother had managed to squeeze past in all her haste. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. It would be better if we speak inside the hut. I’d rather have this conversation in private without listening ears.”

My frown deepened, and I found myself begrudgingly nodding.

“Okay,” I said in the smallest of voices.

I had some idea about what was about to happen. I had many apprehensions about why I suspected Luke was here right now and what he was here to do, but it appeared that I was left with very little choice in the matter. I had hoped that he would get the hint and realise that nothing could ever happen between us, but my mother had twisted my arm and taken that choice away from me. While I wasn’t completely blame-free, she had just as much blame in this as I did as she was the one that had led him on. I never wanted to agree to the courtship in the first place, and Luke was blind for not seeing it.

Regardless of everything, I just hoped that Beast wasn’t watching. There was a bigger jealous bone in his body than I had anticipated.

“How are you this morning, Renalia?” Luke smiled softly as he stepped into the hut, gently shutting the door behind him.

“Good,” I pursed my lips, avoiding his eyes. “You?”

“I have to admit, I’m a little nervous.” He chuckled, an intense look on his face as he stared at me.

“You don’t have to be nervous about anything.”

“That’s reassuring to hear. Especially coming from you.”

Don’t say that. I don’t like the sound of that.

“I’ve loved getting to know you over these past few weeks, Renalia.” Luke began, wiping his hands on the side of his trousers. “I’ve not enjoyed anyone’s company as much as yours. I’ve well-travelled, but I’ve never

met anyone like you before, and I dread to think that once Dean, Tristian, and I leave to continue our journey to Scotland to work for the King, I'll never see you again. That terrifies me."

What terrifies you, excites me.

The thought of you leaving makes me so excited.

The moment you leave, my mother will get off my back. And there's only one thing I want more.

Beast.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Luke, but I guess that's just how life works out sometimes. Oh, well." I shrugged, nonchalant but on the side, I leapt with joy.

"Life doesn't have to be that way."

"Oh, but I think it does." I tried to convince him. "We meet new people and move on. That's just the way life works."

"Maybe for some people, but not me. I won't be able to leave you behind, Renalia." He insisted, an earnest look on his face.

I gulped. "You don't mean that."

"I do." Luke exhaled, his lips turning up slightly at the corners as he stared intently at me, as if afraid that I would disappear if he so much as blinked. "I do, and I hope you do, too." With that, Luke dropped himself to one knee in front of me. My heart stopped beating for all the wrong reasons as I watched him reach into his pocket. I didn't need to see it to know what it was.

Stop! Put that thing away! Get off your knees! Stand up for God's sake!

"Please don't do this, Luke," I begged him in a low, terrified whisper, taking a precautionary step back, but there was no stopping him.

"Will you, Renalia, do me the honour of marrying me?"

Not in a million years!

Even though my mother, and practically everyone else in the village, were all but chanting Luke's proposal into existence, I couldn't believe this was happening right now. I couldn't believe that Luke was actually down on one knee with a ring, proposing marriage. To me!

I want to be proposed to, but not by you.

I want to be married one day, but not to you.

If you were Beast, I wouldn't hesitate for a single second. I'd scream my answer at the top of my lungs and throw myself in your arms.

But you're not Beast.

You're Luke, and I don't want to marry you. Ever.

"This can't be happening right now," I whispered, pressing a shaky hand against my mouth. "You need to get up, Luke."

"Will you marry me, Renalia?" Luke repeated himself, ignoring my pleas. The smile slowly slipped off his face and was replaced by one riddled with angst and nerves. "Please, Renalia? Don't think about it too much. Just say yes."

"I can't do this. I can't marry you, Luke." I frantically shook my head, denying him. "Oh, for heaven's sake! Get up! Get off the ground and put the ring away! I can't bear to look at it."

I can't bear to look at you.

"Renalia?" Luke questioned me quietly, slowly rising to his feet. Yet, the ring remained pinched between his thumb and forefinger. "What are you saying?"

"I can't marry you, Luke!" I screamed louder than I expected. "How many times do I have to say it? I don't want to marry you. Ever!"

"If you're worried about Maya, I assure you that you don't have anything to worry about. Maya likes me. She won't object to us getting married." He insisted, but I didn't care. "You don't have anything to worry about, Renalia. Just say yes. Come on, put me out of my misery."

I don't care what my mother thinks.

I don't care what you think, Luke.

I don't care what Andrew and Nancy think.

I don't care what all of Stowe think.

All I cared about was what I wanted, and that was Beast.

"This isn't about my mother."

"Then what is this about?"

Beast.

"I don't know how many times I have to say this, Luke, but I can't marry you. I don't want to marry you. Please understand that!"

"Why not? Why can't you marry me, Renalia? What's wrong with me?" He asked, a pained expression on his face.

"I just can't!" I shook my head. Unable to look at him even a moment longer, I moved to rush past Luke, needing to get away from him, but he reached out and grabbed my wrist. When I glanced back at him, his eyes begged me to say.

Don't do that. Don't look at me like that.

I’m sorry I hurt you.

I’m sorry my mother gave you false hope.

But I can never marry you.

I don’t love you.

I only love Beast.

And it feels like I’m betraying him right now even though I didn’t ask for this.

Chapter Thirty-Three

"Please don't do this to me, Renalia. I can't imagine a future without you." Luke begged, his hold on my wrist growing tighter, refusing to let go.

"You don't mean that, Luke." I insisted, trying to free myself, but it was no use. His grip was too tight. "Can you please let go of my wrist?"

"Not until you agree to give my proposal some real thought." He tried to bargain. Gone was the cool and relaxed Luke I had come to know, and in his place was a dark look on his face and the darkest scowl I had ever seen a person muster. Beast was the only person who looked scarier than Luke did right now, but he wasn't human.

I couldn't see what Milly and the other girls in the village saw in him. Sure, his uncle was the chief of Stowe, his father was the chief of his village, and he would soon be working as a knight for the King of Scotland, but all those things were handed to him. He didn't earn any of it.

"When I say that I cannot accept your proposal, I mean it," I pursed my lips, trying–and failing–to free myself from his hold. "Now, can you please let go of me? I want to go on a walk."

"Let me come with you," Luke demanded, his hold on me only tightening. "If you don't want to talk, then we won't talk. We'll just walk together."

"That's not a good idea." I sighed in frustration, my lips still pursed. "You should be with someone that wants to be with you, Luke. Not someone like me who isn't able to return your feelings."

"You haven't even tried to return my feelings. That's hardly fair."

“That’s not the way things work.” I groaned, starting to grow annoyed. “If I have to try to return your feelings, then we shouldn’t be together. That’s not fair on you.”

“Will you at least consider my proposal before giving me a definite answer?” He continued with the most sorrowful expression I had ever seen, but concealed anger swirled in his eyes. I wasn’t sure if I should feel bad for him or scared that he wasn’t taking the rejection well. “I can give you some time to think about it. Maybe I can drop by tomorrow after you’ve slept on it?”

You can try, but that’s not going to do any good. I’m not going to change my mind.

“I’ll be honest with you, Luke. I’ve never liked you as more than a friend. I never wanted to court you in the first place.”

“Then why did you?” His eyes hardened, and his grip on my wrist loosened ever so slightly, but not enough for me to yank it out of his grasp.

“I never agreed to anything. My mother did, and you went with it.” I reminded him.

“But you didn’t say anything. You made me think that you wanted this as well.”

“I’m sorry for that.” I sighed. “But what did you expect me to do? Turn you down in front of your family and friends? Not to mention my mother who we both know is an absolute nightmare. She’s obsessed with the idea of me marrying you even though I’ve made it very clear to her from the very beginning that I don’t want that.”

“You shouldn’t speak about Maya like that. She’s a good woman and has only tried to do what’s best for you.”

“She’s my mother, not yours. You don’t have to live with her. You don’t know what she’s really like.” I snorted. “But we’re not talking about that right now. I’m sorry, Luke, but we can’t get married. I appreciate the offer, truly, I do, but it’s not going to work.”

“You led me on, Renalia.” Luke huffed, his scowl deepening. “You never should have agreed to court me if you didn’t want to.”

“You’re right, and I’m sorry. You asked me to court you in front of everyone, and I froze. My mother said yes, and you all started celebrating before I could say anything. What did you expect me to do?”

“You should have told the truth.”

“Okay, you’re right. I should have, but you can’t tell me that you haven’t noticed my strange behaviour with you.” I sent him a pointed look. “You can’t tell me that there’s not a small part of you that knows I’ve never been as interested in you as you are in me.”

“I didn’t notice anything strange.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“You led me on, Renalia, and now you’re trying to blame this on me.”

“I’m not trying to blame anything on you.” I sighed deeply, feeling like we were going nowhere with this argument. “If this is anyone’s fault, it’s my mother’s. It’s partly mine but mostly hers. She keeps pushing me at you no matter how many times I say that I don’t want to marry you.”

“Don’t blame all of this on Maya. It’s not all her fault. You should have said no from the very beginning.”

“Yes, I should have turned you down then and there, but you shouldn’t have proposed to me in front of everyone. Seriously, what were you thinking?”

“I thought you’d be happy about it.”

You don’t know how to take a hint, do you?

Even when I come out clean and paint the picture for you, you still don’t understand.

“Don’t be too hasty to turn me down, Renalia.” Luke insisted. “As beautiful as you are, you haven’t got much else going for you. Actually, you don’t have anything else going for you. You come from an extremely poor background. You’re an illegitimate child, and wash clothes to put scraps of food on your plate every day. Men aren’t exactly fighting among themselves for your hand in marriage.”

“And despite all that, you still decided to propose to me? Thank you. I’m so honoured.” My nostrils flared, and I rolled my eyes.

“You’ve misunderstood me, Renalia.”

“Really?” I quirked a disbelieving brow at him. “Because it sounds like you’re saying I can’t do better than you.”

“It sounds bad when you say it like that.” Luke sighed, annoyed. “You just need some time to think about my offer. I get it.”

“There’s nothing for me to think about.” I snorted. “I’m not going to marry you, Luke. You have to understand, I can never–”

Luke tugged harshly on my wrist before I could stop him. My eyes widened in shock as he yanked me forward and slammed his mouth

against mine, stealing a kiss. Before I could push away, he had let go of my wrist and retreated to the door before I could demand he leave.

“What’s wrong with you? Why did you do that?” I swivelled around to ask, a horrified look on my face as I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand, desperate to get rid of the taste of him.

“I wanted to give you something to think about, and now I have,” Luke told me, a sick, twisted grin on his face. “You’re clearly very confused, Renalia. That’s okay. I’ll come by tomorrow morning for your answer. Think about me tonight. Don’t make the biggest mistake of you life.”

Luke saw himself out of the hut, and I barely had a second to myself before my mother burst in with a frantic, wild look on her face.

“Did he do it?” She asked excitedly, jumping on the balls of her feet as she eagerly, yet impatiently awaited my answer. “Did he ask you?”

“If you’re asking if Luke proposed, he did,” I replied dryly, my tone monotonous voice as I struggled to get over the shock of what had just happened. Of what Luke had just done.

The more I thought about it, the sicker I felt.

Most of this situation could be blamed on me, but Luke wasn’t completely fault-free either. He pushed his agenda on me just as much as my mother did. And now he had the nerve to turn around and pin all the blame on me?

I had done him wrong, yes, but not once had I suggested that I was interested in having a relationship with him.

Just like my mother, Luke was delusional.

“Oh, I knew he would!” She squealed loudly. I watched in horror as she raised her hand above her head to fist-bump it. “I knew that Luke was going to propose to you. Oh, this is so exciting! I’ve been waiting for this to happen for so long, and now that it has, I can hardly believe it. I don’t think you realise just how excited I really am, Renalia.”

No, mother. I don’t think you *understand.*

“Mother–” I called out to her, wanting to tell her the truth before she got too ahead of herself, but I was cut off by yet another excited squeal. “Mother, stop it!” I called out to her rather forcibly, needing her to listen to me. “For once, can you please listen to what I have to say?”

You won’t be as excited when you hear what I have to say. Though, I have been warning you from the very beginning.

“What is it?” She asked, a large grin still on her face despite my chastising tone. “Is it about the wedding? Of course, Luke must want to get married before he and his friends have to leave for Scotland. Did he say anything to you about a joint wedding? I mean, it makes sense for all three of them to get married on the same day as they’re short on time. Oh, this is all so exciting! I can’t wait to see the look on everyone’s faces once word gets out that Luke proposed to you! Some of those horrid old hags couldn’t believe it when they found out Luke was courting you. I can’t wait to rub this in their faces!”

I hate to ruin your fun, but that’s never going to happen.

“This is exactly what I need to talk to you about.” I huffed and moved in front of the door so she couldn’t leave and started singing her happiness before I forced her to listen to what I had to say. “Luke proposed to me, but I said no.”

“What?” My mother gasped loudly, clutching her chest as she stared at me with wide, almost fearful eyes. “Luke proposed to you?”

“Yes.”

“And you said no?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe this!”

“I don’t know how you can be surprised by this.” I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “I’ve been saying from the very beginning that I won’t marry Luke. This is nothing new.”

My mother’s eyes were so wide as she stared at me that I feared the balls would roll out of their sockets.

“What did Luke say?” She asked in the quietest of whispers. “What did he say when you…” Her voice trailed off as if she couldn’t bring herself to say it.

“He didn’t take it very well. He said to think about it today and give him a definite answer tomorrow.”

Immense relief washed over her.

“You should have started with that from the beginning!” She exhaled deeply, a hand still clutching her chest. “All you have to do is say yes tomorrow when he comes by, and everything will be fine.”

Did you not hear anything I just said?

“I can’t do that,” I said in a small voice, hating how weak I sounded.

“Don’t even start right now, Renalia.” She wagged a warning finger in my face. “You’re lucky Luke is giving you a second chance. You certainly don’t deserve it, so you’re not going to be anything short of grateful, do you understand?”

You’re the one who doesn’t understand.

“I’m going to say to Luke tomorrow exactly what I said today. No.” I clarified.

“What on earth has possessed you, Renalia? Every single girl in the village would die to be in your position. They would die for Luke to propose to them, and here you are, turning him down. What’s wrong with you? Do you know how lucky you are?”

“I don’t want to marry Luke.” I insisted. “And there’s nothing you, or anyone, could say or do to change my mind. I’m not going to marry him, and that’s final. Now, drop it because I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“Renalia!” My mother screeched at the top of her lungs. “It doesn’t matter whether you want to marry him or not!” She stomped her foot on the ground like a petulant child that didn’t get their way. “You should have said yes when he proposed to you. You’re lucky he’s given you time to think over it. I don’t know what possessed him to do that, but I’m grateful. Practice saying yes for tomorrow because there’s nothing to think about. You’re marrying Luke, and that’s that.”

“You’re right. I don’t have anything to think about.” I said, but I doubted my mother was listening to me. “When I say that I’m not going to marry Luke, I mean it. My word is final. This is my life, and I decide how I want to live it.”

“We’ll see about that.” She sneered at me. “I’m going to be there tomorrow, and I’m not going to let you turn him down. I’m not going to let you make the biggest mistake of my life.”

“The biggest mistake of *your* life?” I snorted, beyond caring by this point. “I thought whoring yourself out and getting pregnant out of wedlock was the biggest mistake of your life?”

My mother whipped her hand out to slap me again, but this time, I caught her wrist and pushed her to the side as I marched past her. A few months ago, I would’ve dreamed of standing up for myself like this. I would have never dreamed about even talking back to her, but here I was,

speaking up for myself and standing my ground. I had grown a lot, and I knew the reason behind it. Beast.

"What are you doing, Renalia? Where are you going?" My mother screeched at me, but I was done with this conversation and moved to distract myself by starting the preparations for lunch. My mind had been made up from the very beginning, but my mother refused to believe me. This was her own fault. She chose to be delusional.

I didn't care what my mother said or did any more. I couldn't marry Luke. I wouldn't.

I refuse to marry Luke and be miserable for the rest of my life.

I refuse to be like you.

Chapter Thirty-Four

My mother remained steadfast in her opinion that no matter what happened, I was to say yes to Luke in the morning. I, however, couldn't imagine anything worse.

As soon as she started snoring, I slipped out of the hut and walked toward the forest. After a long, tiresome day with Luke proposing to me and refusing to take no for an answer, and my mother asking if I had changed my mind at every given opportunity, I was tired.

I ached for nothing more than to throw myself in Beast's arms and sleep my worries away. So, when I entered the forest and found him casually leaning against a tree in all his naked glory, waiting for me, I did exactly that.

"I've missed you today." I groaned, pressing my forehead into his chest as I wrapped my arms around his waist. "You would not believe the day I've had."

"Talk," Beast murmured, resting one hand on the small of my back and threading the other in my hair, gently tugging on the fiery curls as he cradled me to his chest like I was the most precious being in the entire world and he never wanted to let me go. I had just arrived, and we had barely spoken, but my mood had already lifted so much, and all the pent-up tension from the day melted away.

Unfortunately, I knew the blissful moment would be short-lived.

"I know you won't like this, but I also know you'd want to know the truth." I rested my chin on his chest as I peered up at him from under my lashes. "Luke proposed to me this morning," I said in one breath. Beast's chest rumbled with a loud, trapped growl, not happy with the little I had

said even though I had barely started. “You know you don’t have anything to worry about, Beast. I only have eyes for you.” I whispered, turning my head to press a kiss to his bare chest, right above his thumping heart. When it beat faster under my lips, I smirked and couldn’t resist pressing my lips to the same spot once again.

“Pretty flower say no?” Beast asked, a sort of dark rumble about his voice as he spoke.

I knew he wasn’t happy despite my best attempts to make him feel better about the situation. Though, I couldn’t blame him for it. I wouldn’t be happy if another woman proposed to Beast.

“Of course, I said no, Beast.” I reached up on my tiptoes to brush my lips against the underside of his chin. “I love you so much. There’s no way I could marry someone else. Especially not Luke. My mother loves him far too much for me to even think about sparing him a second glance.” I joked, but Beast wasn’t in a funny mood.

His arms tightened around me as he held me closer. Almost as if afraid that Luke was going to show up any moment now and whisk me away from him.

“There’s some more that I have to tell you, but you have to promise not to get angry until I finish, okay?” I pleaded for him to hear me out.

Beast reluctantly nodded and dropped his head to brush his lips against the crown of my head. The simple action sent a frenzy of butterflies fluttering in the pit of my stomach, and I couldn’t imagine going a single day without feeling this way. A single day without Beast.

“I was very adamant with Luke this morning when I told him I couldn’t accept his proposal. That I couldn’t marry him. He kept pushing and pushing, but I kept saying no. He said I just needed some to think about it, and he would drop by tomorrow for a definite answer.” I winced when he growled throatily, the scary sound rumbling from deep within his chest.

“Definite…answer?” Beast asked in a low voice, his jaw clenched so tight I feared he would dislocate it.

“You have nothing to worry about,” I assured him. “My answer isn’t going to change. I said no to him today, and I’m going to say no to him again tomorrow. Of course, my mother is adamant that I marry him, and she’ll kill me when I officially reject him tomorrow, but I don’t care.

There’s nothing in this world that’s going to make me marry him. I don’t love him. I only love you, Beast.”

Relief washed in his eyes, and he bowed his head to steal a kiss.

“Love pretty flower.” He murmured, pressing his lips harder against mine and sinking his teeth into my bottom lip, sucking it into his mouth. The simple action set my body ablaze, and I slanted my mouth over his to deepen the kiss, addicted to the taste of him. “Marry pretty flower,” he promised, pulling away only to press the softest of kisses to the tip of my nose.

My heart fluttered at his words, and I felt a warm flush spread over my cheeks. The thought of marrying Beast one day made me happier than I ever thought possible.

“I love you too, Beast,” I reached my arms up to wound them around his neck, needing to feel him closer. “And I can’t wait to marry you either.” I pressed the words to his mouth between kisses. We had technically never discussed it before–I wasn’t even sure creatures like Beast got married like humans did– but hearing Beast say that he wanted to marry me as well, that he had thought about it filled me with hope and so much more love for this man. For this creature.

My creature.

“I can’t wait to marry you one day as well, but I need to finish telling you what happened. Unfortunately, we haven’t gotten to the worst part yet.” I groaned, pressing one more hungry kiss to his lips before forcing myself to pull away. If I didn’t, then I would never finish telling him the end of the story.

And it was important Beast knew the truth. The entire truth.

“Tell me.” Beast prompted me in a low growl, his eyes dark and hungry as he stared intensely at me. When his tongue slipped past his lips and licked along the seams, savouring the taste of me, I groaned in want and desire.

First, the truth, then we can fuck to our heart’s content.

“Before Luke left, he kissed me,” I said in the smallest of voices and winced when Beast growled menacingly at my words. “It was a simple peck on the lips, and he pulled away before I even knew what he was doing. I didn’t want any part of it. It didn’t mean anything. Nothing at all. Luke was just being desperate. If you think about it, it’s actually quite

sad.” I had to stop myself from rambling, especially since it seemed to aggravate Beast rather than assure him that Luke’s kiss meant nothing.

“Luke!” Beast growled, one hand fisted against my back while the other fisted around my hair. If he wasn’t so angry, and his eyes hadn’t flashed gold, I would be dripping in need for him. Instead, I was just a little slick, but I was quick to push those thoughts away as I had bigger, and far more pressing matters at hand that I needed to get a grip on.

“Listen to me, Beast,” I called out to him, rising on my tiptoes. Cupping his face, I brought it down to press his forehead against mine. “I need you to listen to me, okay?” I asked, staring him right in the eye.

If this were anyone else, or even another creature, for that matter, I would never have dared to look them in the eye. Especially not under such close proximity, but this was Beast, and I knew he would never hurt me. Intentionally or unintentionally.

Beast would never lay anything less than a pleasurable finger on me.

“Luke kissed me. I didn’t kiss him back, and I certainly didn’t want him to kiss me in the first place.” I told him, my words slow and deliberate. I knew it was difficult for him to keep up with me when I spoke too fast, and I could only imagine that it was even harder when he was so filled with rage and possibly on the brink of murder. “That kiss didn’t mean anything, and my answer isn’t going to change tomorrow. Luke can give me all the time in the world to ponder my answer to his proposal, but it’s never going to change. Why would I even entertain the thought of kissing or marrying Luke when I have you?”

Beast growled, his chest rumbling against mine but slowly, he released his fists. His hands slid down my back and settled on my hips, pulling them flush against his until there wasn’t even a hair span of distance between our bodies, and I could feel his growing cock press into my stomach.

“Promise?” He whispered, his forehead still pressed against mine. “Renalia love Beast?”

“I promise I love you, Beast.” I grinned up at him, my heart warming at the loving expression on his face. “My heart beats for you, and only you.”

“Pretty flower say mine,” Beast growled.

“I’m yours.” I exhaled, all but melting into his arms. “I love you, and I’m yours. All yours, Beast.”

“Yours,” Beast growled in response, bowing his head to brush the words against my mouth. “Renalia my pretty flower. Beast no share. Beast love pretty flower. Beast kill for pretty flower. Pretty flower mine.”

Instead of his show of possession scaring me, my lips stretched into a grin as I stared up at him.

Beast and I were endgame. I was sure of it. And I knew that in the end, regardless of what happened, everything would be okay.

We would be okay.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Beast pinched my chin and tilted my head back. I puckered my lips in anticipation, and my eyes fluttered closed as his face descended for a kiss. It started out soft and innocent but quickly grew heavy as his tongue dove into my mouth and explored, making me dizzy and drunk on the addictive, musky taste of him. I couldn't help but moan at the feel of his tongue against mine, stroking and sucking it.

One moment we were kissing, him claiming my mouth as he explored every crevice with his wet tongue, and the next, my dress slipped off my shoulders and fell to the ground, leaving me as naked as the way I was born.

Beast growled at the feel of my naked skin against his. I arched my back to press my boobs into his chest, and his hands dropped to squeeze my hips, pulling me closer to him.

How could I even consider Luke's proposal when Beast was everything I wanted and so much more?

I didn't care if Beast and I never got married. As long as we were together and in love, I was happy.

All I wanted was Beast. Nothing more. Nothing less.

And certainly not anyone else.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, my fingers disappeared in the thick mane of his hair, getting lost in the surprisingly soft wisps and raking my nails against his scalp. Beast growled as I tugged on his hair, the slight pain spurring him on as he pressed his mouth harder against mine, deepening the kiss.

My pussy clenched at the way he held and touched me, and the wanton whore inside me couldn't resist arching my back to press my hard, pebbled nipples against his chest.

As if burnt by my touch, Beast suddenly sprang away from me.

"What's wrong?" I asked, my lips parted and panting slightly as I stared back at him. With every silent moment that passed, I started to grow more worried. "Beast? Did I do something wrong?"

Beast remained silent, staring at me as if I had grown two heads. It was only when I snapped my fingers in front of his face that he returned to me.

His golden eyes held mine for a moment before they travelled down my face and shoulders until they raked over my bare breasts and hard nipples. Half because of the cold, and half in desire for his hard cock which had been pressed up against my stomach only a few moments ago. They eventually move down to the soft curve of my stomach, lingering there.

My stomach had never been completely flat, especially around my monthly cycle, but I wasn't usually this bloated. With fewer clothes to wash and more food to eat, I could tell I had put on a little weight. It didn't bother me because I thought it looked more flattering than my usual malnourished look, and it appeared that it didn't bother Beast either as there wasn't any hint of judgement or distaste on his face as he stared at me. More than anything, he looked curious and confused. And a little like he was in awe.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Beast?" I asked in a quiet voice.

Beast skipped the vocalisation as he reached between us and pressed his hand against my stomach. He held his breath and his eyes zeroed in on where his hand rested on my stomach, applying the slightest amount of pressure.

"Baby," Beast exhaled in the faintest of whispers, his lips turning up at the corners as he pressed his hand harder on my stomach.

"What?" I gasped.

"Baby," Beast repeated with the happiest, most amazed smile on his face that I had ever seen on anyone before. "Beast and Renalia…baby."

A baby?

I waited for the fear and panic to settle in, but it never came. Of course, I was nervous, but nowhere near enough as I probably should have been. Instead, my lips twitched up slightly at the corners, and I reached

down to press my hand over his, still coming to terms that I was growing our baby in my stomach.

Our baby.

The product of our love.

“Are you sure?” I asked in a small voice, more afraid of Beast being wrong than the scary notion of me being pregnant out of wedlock.

This was exactly what my mother warned me against. She had done the same thing nineteen years ago. She fell in love with my father, a traveller, and they had sex out of wedlock. When she told my father she was pregnant, he fled. Not only did she never see him again, but she was stuck with me.

It was funny how history had a way of repeating itself.

Except, my mother and I were two very different women, and Beast and my father–not that I had ever met him–were two very different men.

“Yes.” Beast nodded his head frantically, his lips stretching so much at the corners that the grin completely took over his face. “Baby.” He exhaled and wound his arms around my waist once again, pulling me flush against his chest. “Our baby.”

“Our baby,” I repeated in a quiet murmur, so many thoughts running through my mind. All positive. All happy.

“Love pretty flower so much,” Beast grunted and crushed his mouth against mine, as if determined to devour me and pour all his love into the kiss at the same time. “Beast love Renalia. Beast love baby. Our baby.”

My eyes stung with unshed tears as I kissed him back and held on tightly, overwhelmed with happiness and glee.

“I love you too, Beast,” I whispered against his mouth, moaning as he sucked on my tongue. “And I love our baby so much already. I can’t believe I’m pregnant. I can’t believe we’re having a baby.”

In this moment, I didn’t worry about what my mother would say or do when she found out I was pregnant. I didn’t worry about how I would turn down Luke tomorrow or how the people of Stowe would react to all of this.

Right now, I couldn’t bring myself to care about anything but me, Beast, and our baby.

“I can’t believe this!” I giggled in excitement. “I can’t believe I’m pregnant,” I whispered, reaching up on my tiptoes to press the words against his lips. “I can’t believe that we’re having a baby.”

“Renalia good mother,” Beast grinned against my mouth, gently sucking on my bottom lip. The sensation went all the way down to my pussy, making it even wet and slicker than it already was. I moaned and tightened my arms around him, needing to feel him closer.

“And you’ll be an amazing father.” I sealed the promise with a hard, bruising kiss. “But right now, we’re going to make passionate love,” I demanded, pressing one last lingering kiss to his lips before sliding my hands down to his chest and pushing him away from me.

A warning growl escaped Beast, but before he could pull me back into his arms, I pushed on his shoulders until finally, he obeyed and dropped to the ground on his back.

Beast watched me with dark, hungry eyes as I moved to straddle him. I grabbed his angry cock at the base and pointed it at my entrance, sinking down on him. I moaned and arched my back as he impatiently thrust from underneath. My ass smacked against his thighs to take him deeper, only stopping when he was balls deep inside me to savour the feeling of being so full.

A hungry moan escaped me as Beast gripped my hips and bent his legs at the knees, giving me a one-second warning before he pulled me off him. Before I could complain, Beast dropped me back on him once again, the smacking sound of my ass cheeks against him filling the clearing, but it was drowned out by the loud moan that escaped me.

Beast groaned, moaned, and grunted as he drilled into me from underneath, feeling as if he was going deeper and deeper each time.

“Tight pussy.” One of his hands drifted from my hip to squeeze my boobs which swayed with each hard thrust he expertly delivered. “Pretty pussy.” He whispered, his voice strained as he pinched and tugged on a nipple before pawing at the other one.

His words went straight to my pussy, and I moaned at the overwhelming sensation. Sucking harshly on two fingers, I slipped my hand between us and rubbed my clit as I bounced on his cock like he was my own personal sex toy. The way he met me thrust for thrust, hitting the special spot deep inside me, time after time, pushed me closer to the edge until finally, I mewled as I felt myself cream around his cock.

The feeling of my release dripping out of me and down his cock as he continued to pound my pussy, drawing out my pleasure, I quickly felt the tell-tale signs of my second orgasm begin to build.

Except, it never came. And neither did Beast's.

"Renalia?" A familiar voice called out to me, forcing Beast and me to pause our passionate session of lovemaking. "Is that you, Renalia?"

A fearful shiver ran down my spine when I realised who it was.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Horror washed over me at the reality that we were moments away from being discovered.

"Renalia?" Luke called out to me again, his voice sounding much louder and closer than before. "What are you doing out in the forest so late?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I came out here for a walk," I called back, hoping my answer would keep Luke away so he wouldn't see Beast. That, and also the fact that Beast was currently balls deep inside me, hard and pulsing as he continued to pound my pussy. My cheeks flushed with the fear of being discovered, but when I glanced down, Beast had a dark, depraved look on his face which only made me burn so much hotter for him.

"Beast." I moaned in a whisper and pressed my palms to his chest. My hips acted on their own accord as I rolled into him, savouring the feeling of his hard cock so deep inside me, hitting spots I didn't even know existed. "We need to stop, Beast." I groaned even though my pussy clenched tightly around him, greedy and hungry to cum. "Luke is going to find us."

"No Luke!" He growled, his chest rumbling underneath the palms of my hands as he drilled into me harder and faster. "Beast! Beast fucking pretty flower!"

The timing was the worst, but my eyes rolled to the back of my head as Beast fucked me into oblivion. One hand dropped from my hip, and he thumbed my clit, alternating between pressing down hard on it and flicking it back and forth, touching me in the way I needed to push me over the edge. It was risky, and it would no doubt backfire on us, but I

couldn’t help but come all over Beast’s cock as he pounded into me through my orgasm, drawing it out.

“Renalia!” Luke’s voice dripped with concern as he called out to me again. “What was that noise? You sounded hurt. Are you okay?”

“No!” I half-yelled, half-moaned as the aftershocks of the orgasm racked through my body, my hips still rotating on Beast’s cock. I felt bad that he hadn’t come yet, and probably wouldn’t for a while because Luke was close. The defeated look in his eyes told me he knew. “I’m fine, Luke! I’m not hurt.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m perfectly fine!” I called back, scrambling to my feet and looking for my dress which I had thrown off carelessly once Beast got his hands on me. “You can head back. You don’t have to wait for me. I’m going to walk some more and then head back.”

“I insist that I walk you back, Renalia.” His voice sounded much closer than before, and it sent my heart into a fearful frenzy. “It’s not safe for you to be out here alone.”

Beast growled lowly and threw my dress at me. He was by my side in a flash and managed to push the dress over my head mere seconds before we were discovered.

“You really shouldn’t go for walks this late at night, Renalia. You don’t know–“

Luke burst through the clearing, and the words died on the tip of his tongue as he took in the bizarre, unexplainable sight in front of him.

“Renalia?” He whispered, his eyes glued to the obscene sight in front of him–me rushing to push my arms through the dress and pull it down to cover myself. My cheeks flamed at being caught half-dressed by Luke, but that was the least of my worries right now.

“What on earth is going on here, Renalia?” Luke’s voice was higher as horror danced in the deep blue of his eyes, visible even in the darkness of the forest. “Why were you half-dressed?” His eyes wandered over to the large specimen next to me, naked as the day he was born and his cock still glistening with my juices. If the situation wasn’t so dire, I would be on the brink of death from embarrassment. “And who is he?”

I felt my body go into shock as the severity of the situation washed over me. The fact that Luke had no doubt caught a glimpse of my boobs and wet pussy before I managed to pull my dress down was the least of my

worries right now. My mother was the last person in Stowe to have been caught having sex out of wedlock, and that was because she had fallen pregnant without a man attached to her name. Not only had I done the same thing, but I had been physically caught in the act by Luke.

It just couldn't be anyone else, could it?

As if this bizarre love triangle wasn't already complicated enough.

"Luke," I whispered, not moving from Beast's side. "I don't know what you think you saw, but it's not what you think."

"I highly doubt that," Luke whispered back, talking to me, but his eyes were locked on Beast who had the same look on his face as he did the last time he hunted dinner for us both.

Thirsty for blood.

I didn't doubt for a second that Beast had the upper hand in this situation. If he wanted, he could snap Luke's neck and drain the life out of him in a matter of seconds, but that would raise too many unwanted questions and set too many probing eyes on the forest. Not only would it be impossible for me to continue my walks, but it would be impossible for Beast to live here. I knew he would try, but for his own safety, he would have to eventually leave. And if he didn't, then I would force him.

And if Beast left, then I would have to leave as well.

Baby or not, I was never leaving his side.

"What were you doing before I caught you, Renalia?" Luke asked, his tone accusatory.

"None of your business."

Luke's nostrils flared with rage, and he took a menacing step toward me, but I wasn't the least bit scared. Not with Beast right beside me. If anything, Luke was the one who should be scared, but it appeared he was allowing his anger and jealousy to rule him right now.

"I proposed to you this morning. That means everything you do is my business."

"You may have proposed, but I turned you down." I reminded him with a sneer, unable to hold myself back.

His jaw clenched, and he took another step toward me. "And I said you were going to think about it and give me a definite answer in the morning."

"I'll save you the trouble. My answer hasn't changed since this morning. It's still no. Now, leave."

“You’re turning me down for *him*?” Disgust washed over his face as his eyes flitted back to Beast. That didn’t settle well with me.

“Don’t speak to him like that.” I snapped.

“Then how should I speak to the man who was fucking my fiancé?” Luke spat at us, his eyes hard and the expression on his face downright hateful.

“I’m not your fiancé.” I huffed. “What’s wrong with you? Why can’t you take no for an answer? How many times do I have to reject you before you finally accept that I’m never going to marry you?”

Anger swirled in his eyes, and he forced himself to turn to Beast once again even though his words were directed at me. “You’re seriously turning me down for this man?”

“Yes.”

“He’s not from Stowe.”

I didn’t say anything. There wasn’t much for me to say. Luke had met everyone who lived in Stowe, and if he had met Beast before, he would have remembered him.

“Which village is he from?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Is he going to marry you?”

“That’s none of your business, Luke,” I repeated, grinding my teeth.

“What’s wrong, big guy?” Luke sneered at Beast. “The size of your cock means nothing when you allow a woman to talk for you.”

Beast growled in warning, but Luke took no heed to it.

“I’m glad you rejected me, Renalia.” Luke chuckled, the sound bitter and heavy despite the large grin he had plastered to his face. “I might have proposed to you, but that was before I found out that you were a whore. If you think he’s going to marry you after you’ve lifted your skirts for him, you’re delusional as well as a whore.”

Beast growled and took a menacing step forward in warning, but I was quick to reach out and grab his wrist, fearful he would do irreversible damage to Luke. Not that Luke didn’t deserve it.

“Don’t you dare speak to me like that! You have no right!”

I narrowed my eyes at Luke, tightening my grip on Beast’s wrist when he took another step forward, a permanent glower on his face. I knew my hold on his wrist was pointless as I wouldn’t be able to hold him back if he charged at Luke, but it was enough to calm Beast down the slightest

fraction. The last thing we needed right now was for Beast to allow his anger to force him to shift in front of Luke.

This, I could explain, but that, I could never.

“You’re nothing to me but a common whore now. I’m free to speak to you however I see fit. If it weren’t for me, you and your mother would still be washing clothes and eating scraps for meals.”

“That may be true, but I was happier without you in my life.”

“You don’t realise the mistake you’ve made, Renalia.” Luke’s eyes darkened as he glared at me. “Your life would have been set if you married me. You would have never wanted anything. Never gone without anything. We could have been happy together. But you’ve thrown all that away, and for what? A big cock to fill you up? I could have given you that.”

“You’re disgusting.” I groaned, turning my nose up in disgust. “Have you never heard of the concept of love?”

“And I suppose you love this nobody?” His voice dripped with disgust, appalled by the notion.

“Yes,” I answered with the utmost confidence and clarity, lifting my chin as I glared back at Luke. “He may be a nobody to you, but he’s absolutely everything to me. He’s my entire world.”

“Have you thought about what people are going to say when they find out about this?” The glint in his eyes promised me that he would be the one to announce the news of my out-of-wedlock activities.

“I don’t care what people think. Nothing is going to change my mind or my feelings.”

“Feelings? What feelings?” Luke snorted and rolled his eyes. “He just wants you for your pussy. Once he gets bored of it, he’ll move on to the next desperate whore, so don’t think you’re special. You’ll be back living with your mother in that miserable hut of yours, and no man will ever marry you. They’ll only ever want between your legs. Nothing more because that’s what whores are good for. Lifting their skirts and spreading their legs for any man that so much as looks their way.”

I didn’t need to look at Beast to know his resolve had snapped. To know that I wouldn’t be able to hold him back no matter how hard I tried.

Me letting go of his wrist was the final push he needed.

“Quiet!” Beast demanded in a booming voice, the ground beneath our feet quivering from the sheer strength and power behind it.

Luke backed away several steps and visibly gulped, fear-stricken. I would be, too, if I were him.

“Renalia deserve better!” Beast growled as he fisted his hands, taking slow, menacing steps toward Luke. “Renalia not whore!”

“Renalia?” Luke called out to me in a shaky voice, his eyes wide and fearful as he scrambled to get away from Beast but only succeeded in tripping over a stray branch and tumbling to the ground. “Why are his eyes that colour? What’s wrong with him?”

“The colour of his eyes should be the last of your worries right now.” I snorted and crossed my arms over my chest, not lifting a finger to help Luke.

When Luke had been spewing such hateful speech, I saw him as the disgusting, vile, and foul human being that he truly was, masked by a bright smile and polite manners. He was the true monster in this situation, not Beast, but the people of Stowe wouldn’t see it that way. Those humans from villages in the past hadn’t been able to see past the creature, and I knew nothing would be different here.

After all, history had a way of repeating itself.

“Renalia pretty flower! Renalia good! Renalia not whore!” Beast continued growling, his body shaking as he stopped at Luke’s feet, glaring down at the pathetic, cowering human.

“I’m sorry!” Luke squealed, begging for his life. “I take back everything that I said about Renalia! I’m sorry!”

“Too late.” Beast chuckled darkly, and I watched as he reached one arm down and fisted the collar of Luke’s shirt. He lifted Luke high into the air before a simple flick of the wrist sent him flying into a tree.

I winced as Luke’s back collided with the wood before sliding to the ground, scraping his back harshly against the bark. Beast’s growls grew louder as he stalked toward him, but Luke scrambled to his feet and ducked under his arm, running at full speed. My eyes widened in momentary surprise with a pinch of fear sprinkled in as I realised that Luke was running right at me.

“You have to help me, Renalia! There’s something wrong with him. Normal people don’t have eyes like him! Normally people aren’t able to throw other people at trees!” He begged, his pace quickening. “Please, you have to help me!”

I tried to move out of the way, but Luke was faster. He ran right into me, knocking me off my feet and sending me tumbling to the ground. Even though I was very early into the pregnancy, my hands immediately went to my stomach as I braced myself for the fall.

Except, it never came.

Relief washed over me when I felt a pair of strong, familiar arms wrap around my waist and pull me away from the wreck a moment before it was too late. With my heart still skipping several beats, I leaned back against Beast's chest and stared at the pathetic excuse of a man sprawled on the ground at our feet.

"You're pregnant?" Luke asked with wide, disbelieving eyes as he stared up at us both, his eyes zeroing on Beast's hand which cradled my stomach, slowly moving around. The fact that Beast wasn't worrying assured me that our baby was fine, but we still had a situation to deal with.

Beast growled in my ear before I could answer. He dropped a kiss on the top of my head and picked me up to move me to the side. I watched as he grabbed Luke by the neck and lifted him into the air once again, cutting off his air supply this time. Luke's legs dangled in the air, aimlessly kicking, and his arms flailed about in a desperate attempt to save himself, but it was no use. Beast was too strong.

"Don't. Touch. Renalia." Beast spat when Luke's face started to go blue and threw him to the ground.

I took great joy in watching Luke try to crawl away, but my heart fell to the pit of my stomach when Beast growled animalistically and dropped himself to the ground on all fours. Fur sprouted all over his body, and I winced at the loud cracking of bones as his beast took over.

My ears started ringing when Luke screamed at the top of his lungs, the sound far too high-pitched for a man of his calibre, and took off running as fast as his human legs could take him.

"Beast, no! Don't do it! Don't go after him! It's not worth it, Beast!"

One moment Beast was crouched on the ground in his creature form, and the next moment I was gathered in his arms as he held me tightly to his chest.

"You shouldn't have done that," I whispered, wrapping my arms around his waist. "I know you're angry, and you have every right to be, but you shouldn't have transformed. Now Luke knows what you are. He's going to tell everyone in the village, and they're going to come after you."

The last few words were indecipherable as my voice choked with fear and worry. My eyes watered, and I furiously wiped them away. I didn't have time to cry now. Not when I needed to come up with a plan to protect Beast from the judgemental people of Stowe.

If we let Luke get away now, the entire village would find out about Beast before the sun was up, and his life would be in danger. If Beast killed Luke, Stowe would find the body and be on high alert. As Luke was the chief's nephew, they wouldn't just let this go. They'd pry and pry until they had answers, and Beast would be forced to leave to protect himself. And I would go with him.

"Renalia okay?" Beast asked in a frantic voice, completely disregarding everything I had just said to him. "Renalia hurt?" His hands travelled all over my body, paying special attention to my stomach.

"I'm not hurt." I sniffled and shook my head. "I promise I'm not hurt. You caught me before I fell." I assured him, slipping my hands down to press them over his. I couldn't feel the baby yet as it was far too early for that, but standing like this, with both of our hands pressed over my stomach where our love was growing inside me was surreal.

It was heartbreaking to think that we couldn't stay like this forever.

"We need to hide." I brushed my lips against his. "Luke is probably waking up the entire village right now. They're going to come for you soon, so we need to leave."

"Renalia?" Beast whispered my name in a small voice. "Come…with me?"

"Yes." I nodded, pressing another kiss to his lips before I pulled away. "You already know I love you, Beast. I can't live without you. You can't stay here anymore, which means that I can't stay here either. We're in this together."

Everything was up in the air right now. I didn't know how Luke was going to spin this story, or even if he would wait until the morning to announce the news, but it didn't matter. Not if we left before they could come for us.

The only thing I was certain of was that no one would lay a single finger on Beast. And if they tried, they would need to get through me first.

"Together," Beast promised, cupping my face as he guided my head back to his chest. "Beast, pretty flower, and baby. Together. Forever."

When I pushed away slightly to look up at him, I couldn’t bring myself to say anything. He brushed a strand of hair away from my face with a gentle hand. Despite the severity of the situation and just how much things would spiral from here, because I knew they definitely would, just by looking at Beast right now, just by being in his arms, I knew we would be okay. I knew that we would make it to the end, stronger than ever, but I couldn’t help but fear just how dark and rocky the journey would be.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

I knew it was a bad idea the moment I suggested it, but my mind was made up. Even though my mother had treated me horribly my whole life, I needed to see her one last time before I left. If I didn't, I would forever live with the reminder that my last memory with my mother was us arguing over me not wanting to get married to Luke, and that didn't settle well with me. It made me a masochist, but I couldn't stop thinking about it since Beast and I came to the difficult decision that we needed to leave.

It was still the middle of the night, and my mother wouldn't be awake for several hours, but a silent goodbye was better than no goodbye. It was probably better that way anyway.

My mother didn't deserve the sweet gesture after the way she had treated me my whole life, but Beast was right. She was the only family I had left and the only tie to my old life. After today, I would start my new life with Beast, and soon, our baby–my new family–and I couldn't be more excited.

The plan was to get in and out of the hut and return to the forest as soon as possible so Beast and I could leave before Luke woke up all of Stowe, but I stopped in my tracks when the path ahead lighted up. Fear struck my heart when I returned to Stowe to be met with firelit torches and an angry mob.

And of course, leading the mob, was Luke.

"Renalia? What are you doing there?" Nancy called out to me, her eyes tired but worried.

"She's come from the forest." A person spoke up.

“You believe me now, don’t you?” Luke yelled, dirt smudged across his cheeks from when he fell over earlier. He pointed the fire torch at me, and I took a cautionary step back.

“Yes, we do,” Andrew said, setting his accusatory eyes on me.

“I think it’s only fair that we hear Renalia out.” Nancy stepped forward, her eyes lingering on me for a moment before she turned around to address everyone. “We’ve all heard Luke’s version of the story, and frankly, it sounds a little farfetched. It’s only fair we hear Renalia’s version of the story before we make any conclusions.”

The entire village watched as Andrew marched over to his wife and dipped his head to whisper something in her ear. They argued back and forth in harsh whispers until eventually, Andrew clenched his jaw and took a step back, telling us all who won the argument.

“Renalia.” Nancy addressed me with a hint of bitterness in his tone. “Please step forward and tell everyone your version of the story.”

“Thank you.” I exhaled in relief and glanced to her left where my mother was standing in silence. Her eyes were wide with disbelief and flickered back and forth between Luke and me. She looked absolutely horrified. As if choosing between her daughter and the man she hoped to make her son-in-law was difficult.

Don’t worry, mother. I know better than to expect anything else from you.

I’m glad I’m leaving because I’m so done with you.

You’re a sorry excuse for a mother. Always have been, and always will be.

I’m glad I won’t be around to put up with it anymore.

Dragging my eyes away from my mother, I lifted my chin high, refusing to stand down. It was difficult to be confident when there was so much at stake here, but there would be fatal consequences if anything went wrong.

Going second put me at a disadvantage. Luke had already told his version of the story, and I knew that whatever I said now, not many people would believe me.

The facts were that Beast wasn’t human and he had transformed in front of Luke, but I couldn’t tell the people of Stowe that. Not when it put Beast’s life in danger and now, mine and our baby’s, too.

My lips parted to finally address the people of Stowe, but Luke interrupted me before I could get a word out.

“I don’t understand why Renalia is being given a chance to speak. Have you all not been listening to what I’ve been saying? She’s romantically involved with a monster! A creature that shifts between human and a monster.” Luke spat, his face a mask of disgust, but underneath it, I saw fear. “Don’t even try to discredit me, Renalia. Don’t even try to deny it. I know what I saw. You can lie as much as you want, but everyone here knows I’m telling the truth. Everyone believes me here. They’re not going to believe anything you’re about to say.”

I pursed my lips and made an obvious show of sending him a funny look.

“Are you feeling alright, Luke?” I asked in a small voice, my eyebrows furrowing together in faux concern. “You were acting very strange in the forest. I don’t know what you think you saw, but I was just out for a walk. I know we agreed to meet earlier, but then you arrived and started acting strange. Did you by any chance eat anything funny at dinner?”

“Did I eat something funny at dinner?” Luke gaped in disbelief. “I know what you’re doing!” He accused. “You can give it up now because it’s not going to work.”

“I don’t know why you’re talking like this, Luke. Don’t you remember?” I asked in a quiet voice, blinking innocently at him for all to see. “You stopped by my hut in the morning and asked me to meet you in the forest tonight. I didn’t agree at first because it felt improper.” I lied smoothly, purposely avoiding my mother’s eyes as I knew she would see right through the act. “You said if I agreed to meet you in the forest tonight, you’d propose to me. I’m a little embarrassed to admit that I fell for it.”

“I’ve never heard such bullshit before in my life.” Luke cursed, his features etched with frustration. “Sorry for my language everyone but Renalia is lying through her teeth. She’s completely made up that story.”

“I’m lying?”

“Yes.”

“What? You didn’t drop by my hut this morning?”

“I did.”

“And you didn’t allude to proposing to me?”

“I did a whole lot more than allude.” He snorted and rolled his eyes, his face turning a light shade of red. “I physically proposed to you this morning.” Gasps filled the village. “And you turned me down.” His face burned when the gasps grew louder, shocked.

I took a little satisfaction in the fact I knew it hurt his ego to admit that.

“I don’t quite remember it that way.” I accused him with a fierce look. “You’ve already painted me as desperate. Don’t you dare try to paint me as a liar, too.”

“I’m not painting you as anything.” He growled. “You’ve painted yourself a liar by standing here and lying in front of everyone.”

“I’m not lying about anything.” I huffed. “You told me to meet you in the forest tonight after my mother fell asleep. I was hesitant at first but I gave in, and when I arrived, you were nowhere to be seen. I walked around for a bit, telling myself that you were just running late, and when you finally showed up, you ran to wake up the entire village and shame me in front of everyone. How could you be so cruel?” Tears sprung to my eyes–not just for show–but I refused to let them fall. “I only came out here because I thought you would propose to me, and instead you make a fool of me? I didn’t think you could do something like this, Luke. I never expected this from you.”

“Luke. Renalia.” Nancy called out to disrupt us. “I don’t quite know what’s going on, but let’s leave it here for now. We can discuss this in private in the morning. There’s no need to keep everyone awake.”

“Okay.” I sniffled and wiped away the tears. “I think that’s a good idea. We can talk about this in the morning.”

I moved in the direction of our hut, planning to sneak out as soon as my mother fell back asleep but once again, Luke interrupted me.

“No, this can’t wait until the morning. This is serious! Renalia is lying to protect her monster!” Luke protested.

“What monster?” I snorted. “The only monster I see here is you, Luke. If you didn’t intend to propose to me, you shouldn’t have strung me along like this. You shouldn’t have suggested that you were going to propose to me tonight instead of ridiculing me in front of everyone like this. Do you know how that makes me feel?”

“How that makes *you* feel?” Luke gaped, his eyes widening in disbelief. “I’m going to set the record straight here. It hurts my ego to

keep repeating this, but you rejected me this morning, and I've been down about it all day. I had a lot on my mind and couldn't sleep, so I went for a walk to clear my head when I spotted you sneaking out of your hut. I called out to you, but you didn't hear me, so I decided to follow you." At his incriminating, yet truthful words, my breath hitched. Before it could give me away, I covered it up with a loud gasp, feigning horrified shock.

I needed Luke to stop speaking, but I also needed to be very mindful of everything. One slip-up and things could end very badly. Not just for me, but for Beast, as well.

"I followed you to the forest, and then I lost you for a while." Luke paused, glaring at me. "I didn't see you leave the forest, so I knew you were still in there somewhere, but for the life of me, I couldn't spot you anywhere. It was dark and cold, and you were in there for a while, so I started to get worried. I thought something might have happened to you and I didn't want to leave you out there alone. I finally found you in a clearing with a man. If you can even call him that." Luke snorted in disgust.

"That's not true." I shook my head frantically, speaking loud and clear. "I only headed out to the forest because you told me to meet me there tonight. Stop trying to spin the story to blame me when you were the one to orchestrate this whole thing."

"Why would I do that after you rejected me this morning?"

"Why would I reject you? I really like you, Luke. The only reason I'm here right now is because I thought you would propose to me."

"Stop lying!" Luke yelled at me, his face flushing red in anger. "How dare you lie about me in front of everyone like this! You turned down my proposal for that monster in the forest! That monster you were fucking like a whore!"

"Enough!" Andrew yelled louder than Luke, his voice booming as he took charge of the situation. "I know how to settle this," he sent a pointed look to the both of us before turning around and scanning the crowd of tired and sleepy villagers. "Maya, could you please join us?"

I couldn't keep the horror off my face when my mother stepped forward upon the chief's request. When she turned her nose up at me, no doubt at all the lies that I had spewed, all hope flew out the window. I begged her with my eyes, but I couldn't think of anything more pointless.

“Did you have something to ask me, chief?” My other asked politely, though her eyes remained glaring at me.

“The only thing Luke and Renalia seem to agree on is that he dropped by your hut this morning.” Andrew’s face was hard, glowering as his eyes flitted back and forth between Luke and me. “Can you please tell us what happened after that? It’s our only hope of getting to the bottom of all this tonight.”

“Luke dropped by this morning,” my mother began, her eyes set on the chief. “He said he wanted to speak to Renalia in private and I allowed it. I stepped out of the hut for a short while so they could talk, and when I decided to head back, I saw Luke leaving. Renalia told me Luke had proposed, and she had turned him down. Luke was still hanging onto hope, so he asked Renalia to sleep on it and give him a definite answer tomorrow morning.”

Shocked gasps ran through the people of Stowe.

“Did you overhear Luke asking Renalia to meet him in the forest tonight?” Andrew asked, sparing his nephew a dark glare.

“No.” She shook her head. “Renalia didn’t mention anything of the sort to me.”

“So, we’re at a standstill here.” Andrew frowned. “Luke says that he went for a walk, spotted Renalia and then followed her into the forest to find her with a man, and Renalia says that Luke said to meet him in the forest because he was going to propose.” He then turned to me. “Your mother has confirmed that Luke proposed to you this morning, so your story doesn’t add up.”

“My mother is lying,” I boldly said. “She wants me to marry Luke, and she doesn’t want to get on his bad side, so she’s lying. Luke didn’t propose to me this morning. If he did, I would have said yes. Anyone in my shoes would say yes as well.” I continued to lie, feeling like I was getting myself stuck in a web of it. “I thought he was going to propose to me tonight. That’s why I was in the forest in the first place.”

“You’re lying again.” Luke scoffed and threw his hands up in frustration before he turned to his uncle. “You don’t seriously believe her, do you?”

“We’re not believing anyone here yet, Luke,” Nancy spoke up before her husband could. “We’re just trying to hear both sides of the story before we make a decision.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Her husband agreed. “You look like you have something to say, Renalia.”

“We already know why I was in the forest tonight. Anyway, Luke wasn’t there when I arrived, so I found a log to sit on while I waited for him. I had been waiting for a while when I heard some noise. I got a little spooked at first and contemplated leaving, but then Luke turned up. I was relieved to see him, but when he started speaking in riddles, I got even more spooked.”

“There were no riddles.” Luke snorted and rolled his eyes. “We barely even spoke when I found Renalia in the forest. And once again, I’m going to stress that she wasn’t alone.”

I ignored the last comment. “That’s not true. I was hardly able to get a word in edgeways while you spoke in riddles. I struggled to keep up, but it all started to clear when you demanded I take my dress off. And then when I refused, you ran back here to ruin me!”

“I never said such a thing!” Luke was quick to deny, but I refused to stand down even though it was a lie.

I wasn’t just doing this for myself. I was doing this for Beast and our new life together.

If Luke was a better man, I would have felt sorry for him.

“You did, and you made me feel so disgusting. I can’t believe that I was stupid enough to agree to meet you in the forest.” I sniffled and dropped my eyes to the ground, hoping to pull at some heartstrings in the large crowd. “It was such a horrible moment for me. I didn’t know what to do or say, but when I didn’t move to…to take off my clothes…you tried to do it yourself.” My voice cracked at the end, and I made a show of rubbing my eyes to catch the tears before they fell. “You grabbed my wrist, but I was able to pull myself away from you. I ran away from you. You chased after me for a while, but then I lost you. I thought it was safe to return to the hut, and now I’m here.”

“I can’t believe this!” Luke growled in anger, his face turning an even darker shade of red. “I can’t believe how you’re able to look me in the eye and lie about all of this right now! You’re painting me to be a monster even though I’m not the real monster in this situation.” He spat and raised his hand but before he could slap me, Nancy grabbed his wrist.

Luke’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t rebuke his aunt.

“You can lie all you want, but no one here believes you. Before you arrived, I had already told everyone what I saw in the forest.”

“And what did you see in the forest?” I countered in a small voice, deathly afraid of what he had understood, and what he had told everyone.

One glance at the people of Stowe gave me my answer before Luke could tell me.

“Like I said before, I followed you into the forest, but then I lost you. I heard some noise from a clearing, and when I followed it, I found you.” Luke sneered at me, dramatically pausing as he glanced around, as if he made it his personal mission to catch the eye of every single person. “I was shocked to see that you weren’t alone, but I was even more shocked to find you half-naked and scrambling to get dressed. And your friend was as naked as the day he was born.” He chuckled darkly. “And that’s not even the worst part,” he chuckled darkly again. “When I confronted you about it, he got angry and transformed into this huge wolf. This monster. You ordered him to kill me, but I managed to outrun him, and now you’ve come out here to convince everyone that I’m a nutcase when really, you’re the nutcase for being in love with a monster.”

“This is ridiculous!” I huffed, but when I glanced at the crowd, I knew they didn’t believe me. Not one single person.

“But I didn’t get to finish before you burst out of the forest and rudely interrupted me.” Luke glared at me before turning to address the people of Stowe once again, paying special attention to mother who hung off every word of our back and forth. “At one point, when the monster was still in his human skin, he put his hand over your stomach, and that’s when I realised you’re pregnant with his abomination.”

“My child is not an abomination!” I screamed at Luke, struggling to hold back from throwing myself at him and clawing his eyes out.

Red, hot anger pulsed through my veins as I breathed heavily, but it was quickly replaced with horror when I realised what I had just admitted. That I had just given up not only myself but Beast, as well.

A loud gasp filled the air, and it took a few seconds to realise it came from me. I clamped my palm against my mouth, but it was too late.

I had admitted to Beast’s existence and in turn, put his life in danger.

“I told you I wasn’t lying,” Luke smirked, triumphant, and not even a moment later, the village broke out in an uproar.

Everything else after that moment felt like a blur. More torches were being lit, and several people disappeared to retrieve weapons to fight the monster that inhabited the forest, posing a threat to their women and children.

Women flanked me and grabbed my arms, forcefully dragging me away from the forest, and I could do nothing to stop them. What I could do, however, was stare at the forest as it came to life with the yells and shouts of men thirsty for blood and the illumination from the fire torches they marched with.

If they weren’t on the hunt for Beast, I would have thought it was a beautiful sight.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

My head bobbed sharply to the side, and my cheek burned so hard it felt like my face was on fire. I placed my hand over it to calm the stinging sensation, but it did little to relieve the pain from the hard slap my mother had just delivered in front of all the women in Stowe. My mother could slap me around all she wanted, but it wouldn't change my mind.

Luke may have told everyone about Beast–a *monster*, he had called him–but I was the one that confirmed it. I didn't regret defending my child when Luke called it an *abomination,* but now Beast and I had to face the repercussions for it.

My head flung to the side when my other delivered another sharp slap.

"Renalia!" She screeched at the top of her lungs. "Are you listening to me?"

I cupped both cheeks, my vision blurry with unshed tears that I was struggling to hold back.

"What did you say?" I asked, finally snapping out of the daze.

"Answer me, Renalia!" Uncaring of all the eyes on us, she slapped her hands down on my shoulders and shook me vigorously, as if she was trying to shake the answers out of me. "Was Luke telling the truth?" Her voice dropped to a low whisper, not wanting the other women to hear. However, with the way they all leaned in close, their ears sharpened, I knew they were hanging onto every word exchanged between my mother and me. "Were you…having sex in the forest with an animal?"

"Don't talk about Beast like that, mother! He's not an animal." Once again, the words left my mouth before I could stop them, but everything

was too far gone to conceal the truth now. “Yes, his name is Beast,” I spoke with the utmost confidence, lifting my chin in defiance as I stared my mother in the eyes, showing her that I was not the least bit ashamed. “His name may be a Beast, and he may not be human, but I love him.”

“Nonsense!” My mother snarled. “Luke said that thing in the forest is a *monster*. You cannot love a monster.”

“Stop it! Beast is not a monster!” I denied fiercely, struggling to control my anger. When I couldn’t, I sprang up to my feet and pushed her hands off me. “I love Beast, and he loves me, but of course, you wouldn’t know anything about love, would you, mother?”

“Don’t you dare speak to me like that, Renalia!”

“You’ve never been in love, so your views on love and marriage are baseless.” I snorted, finally having the courage to speak up for myself. It may have taken me nineteen years and getting caught having sex with Beast in the forest, but I was finally defending myself, and I was proud. It was just a shame that my mother didn’t seem fazed in the slightest. More than anything, she looked embarrassed that we were discussing this in front of half of the village.

“I’ve spent so many years telling you you not to make this mistake, and this is what you go and do? How can you be so stupid?”

“There’s nothing stupid about my love for Beast.”

“The *abomination* you’re growing in your stomach is a pretty stupid mistake if you ask me.” She snorted, her face warped in disgust.

“You have no right to speak about my child like that!” I growled, my hands fisted at my side. This was the second time that my child had been labelled an abomination, and I felt like I was hanging on by a thread.

As far as Beast and I were concerned, this child growing in my stomach was the product of our love, and there was nothing anyone could ever say or do to change our minds. I loved Beast with my entire being, and ever since we found out about this child, it felt like my heart had doubled in size.

“I’d be careful if I were you, mother. If you speak about my baby like that one more time, I’ll make you regret it.” I warned her, taking a leaf out of Beast’s book as I glowered darkly at her.

“I can’t believe this! How dare you speak to me, your mother, like this!” She screeched at the top of her lungs, starting to go red in the face. “I did not raise you to be like this. This is not what I taught you. I did not

raise you to have sex with animals or monsters in the forest and get pregnant with their children. I can't believe that you've done this. How could you do this to me? What on earth was going through your mind when–" She continued preaching at me, making some wild accusations, accompanying them with some equally wild names, but I drowned her out.

Contrary to popular belief, I had far greater things to worry about. Like how half of Stowe was out in the forest, wading through it with pitchforks, fire torches and an insatiable thirst for Beast's blood. The picture painted in my head made me feel sick to my stomach, but it was even worse knowing the role that I had played in all of this.

If only I had decided to leave without seeing my mother one last time, then Beast and I would be safe and long gone by now. We'd be long away from Stowe, including Luke and my mother, and we'd be safe, happy, and together.

If I was paying more attention when I left the hut earlier tonight, I would have spotted Luke. I could have made up a lame excuse to throw him off my trail. He would have never followed me, and Beast would have never been discovered. If it weren't for me, Beast's life wouldn't be at risk right now, and we wouldn't have this big of a mess to deal with.

I needed to do something. I couldn't just sit here and defend myself to my mother when Beast was out there, being chased by the fire torches, pitchforks, and narrow-minded villagers that would never accept his unexplainable existence.

"I need to use the washroom," I announced and abruptly rose to my feet.

"How do I know that you're going to use the washroom and not run away to be with that monster of yours?" My mother snapped at me, her face transformed into a look of disgust.

I didn't know the answer to that. How was I supposed to convince my mother and all these other women that I wasn't using the washroom as an excuse to escape when that was exactly what I was planning?

"I'll go with her to make sure she doesn't escape." A familiar voice sounded from the back of the crowd.

Everyone, including me, turned to stare at the woman who pushed her way to the front. A wave of relief first washed over me, followed quickly by confusion when Jane moved to stand next to me.

“Thank you, Jane.” My mother exhaled in relief. “Please make sure she doesn’t take too long. And if you so much as suspect that Renalia is trying to escape, just scream and we’ll be there.”

“I will. You don’t have anything to worry about, Maya.” Jane agreed and led me to the washroom by hand. I had been hopeful that she would wait outside, giving me the privacy I needed to execute my plan, but that wasn’t the case. “What? You thought I’d wait outside?” Jane chuckled as she turned to face me after locking the door.

“Something like that,” I murmured, a conflicted look on my face. There was no way I could escape with Jane watching my every move. “I thought we were friends.”

I was no use to Beast stuck in the bathroom.

“We are friends,” Jane told me, her eyes drifting away from me as she glanced around the room.

We were in the chief’s hut, and just like everything else, the washroom was large and lavish. And such a lavish washroom came with a steel bathtub at the centre of the room, fluffy towels that hung from the back of the door and a small window which faced the forest.

“You didn’t really need the bathroom, did you?” Jane asked, a small, amused smile on her face as she watched me immediately go to the latch that kept the washroom window closed.

“No.” I shook my head, pushing myself higher on my tiptoes, a multitude of frustrated groans escaping me as I still couldn’t quite reach. I could feel Jane’s eyes boring into the back of my head as she watched me, but I didn’t care. I just hoped my actions would confuse her long enough for me to get the window open and slip out.

“Here, let me help you.” Jane offered, and I moved to make room for her. As she was a few inches taller than me, it was much easier for her to unhook the latch and push the window open. The gap was smaller than I would have hoped, but it was my best bet at escape right now.

“Why are you helping me?” I asked in a small voice, caught by surprise by her actions.

“Because we’re friends, and I always thought you never deserved to be treated so terribly. Your mother, perhaps, but that’s only because of how horrible she is all the time, but you, Renalia? Never.” She told me, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze before stepping to the side. “Plus, I know

that you wouldn't be doing all of this if you didn't think that this…man, was the love of your life."

"He is the love of my life," I said confidently.

"Then I'm happy for you." Her lips turned down slightly at the corners. "I know we don't have time to talk right now, but I want you to know that I'm happy for you. Luke is a nice guy, but he doesn't deserve you. And it's obvious that you don't return his feelings. I figured that you'd eventually marry him because you never speak back to your mother, but today you did, and I'm so proud of you. Something tells me it has a little something to do with your Beast, and maybe your baby, too." She paused, her face softening as she reached out and placed her hand over my stomach, the pressure gentle. "Despite the severity of the situation, it's the happiest I've ever seen you. And everyone deserves to be happy. Especially you, Renalia."

"Thank you, Jane," I whispered in awe, my voice wavering with emotion. I wished I had more time to hug Jane and express my gratitude for understanding me when no one else did, but I didn't have time to spare. "Mind helping me up?" I asked, referring to the window that I couldn't quite reach.

Jane dropped to her knees in front of me and clasped her hands together, mimicking that of a stepping stone. Bracing my hands on her shoulders, I stood on her hand with one foot to boost myself up. Jane grunted as she lifted me. My fingers fell short of the ledge the first time, but with my arms braced above my head, I kicked off the wall and finally caught it. I tightened my grasp on the ledge and used all my might to lift myself.

My head, shoulders and arms were the first to go through the narrow window. The rest of my body was quick to follow, and I fell to the ground, wincing slightly as my knees ached from the pain, but it was a welcomed alternative as I wasn't willing to risk the beautiful life I was growing in my stomach.

Glancing back at the open window, I vowed that I would never forget Jane or everything she had done for me, not just today, but ever since we became friends many years ago.

I spared one last look at my old life before I turned and ran toward the forest. There was some distance to go, and it wasn't long before I heard

screams from the chief’s hut, alerting me that my escape had been discovered.

Their screams were the motivation I needed to push myself to run faster. Not just away from them but to the forest where Beast needed my help.

I prayed with all my heart that I wasn’t too late.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

I was a little too out of breath than I cared to admit, but I couldn't give up now. Not when Beast was still out there, and the angry mob was still chanting for his blood to fill the village streets.

I knew for a fact that Luke was single-handedly leading the angry mob to the clearing where he had last seen me with Beast. Beast had headed back to his cave when I left to see my mother for the last time, but we agreed to meet back at that clearing. My heart beat harder and faster with each passing second, fearful that I had let the angry mob straight to Beast. If anything happened to him, I would never be able to forgive myself.

My eyes stung with tears at the fear that Beast would get hurt–or worse–because of me, but I blinked them away when I felt someone snag me from behind. A large hand slapped over my mouth to stop me from screaming, and an arm wound around my waist, pulling me flush against a hard chest. We were so close that I felt his heart thumping wildly in his chest before I heard it.

"Pretty flower okay?" Beast bowed his head to whisper in my ear, his hand sliding off my mouth, down the slope of my neck, over my boobs and chest where it felt like my heart was beating a thousand beats per second, before settling on my stomach. Nothing much had changed in the past few hours, and I was far from showing, but there was something special about him resting his hands over where our baby was growing inside me.

"I'm so happy to see you." I exhaled in relief and turned around in his arms to face him. I blinked furiously to control myself, but the sight of him broke the dam, and now tears were streaming down my face. "I was so scared that they had caught you. That something bad had happened to

you.” By this point, I was a blubbering mess, but there was no going back now. “I’m so sorry that all of this is happening. I should have been more careful. I should have looked around and made sure no one was following me before I came to the forest tonight. If only I had looked around, then none of this would be happening and we wouldn’t be in this mess right now. And I never should have suggested seeing my mother one last time. It was stupid and–”

Beast dropped his head to press a soft kiss to my lips. “But pretty flower okay?” He asked with a low groan, raking his teeth over my bottom lip and sucking it into his mouth.

I kissed him back with fervour, but the tears and worry remained.

“I’m okay.” I sniffled and nodded, pressing one last kiss to his lips before I bowed my head and pressed my face into his chest, needing to feel his arms around me now more than ever. “Are you okay?”

Beast nodded and pressed his hand to the small of my back, holding me closer and resting his chin on the top of my head. The moment I felt him press a kiss into my hair, I pressed my face further into his chest and bawled my eyes out. Everything was just too much. Everything had spiralled out of control, and I couldn’t stop obsessing over all the horrible, dangerous things they would do to Beast if they managed to track him down.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered into his chest. “I’m so sorry, Beast. This is all my fault.”

“No.” He grunted and held me tighter. “Pretty flower no sorry.”

Our conversation was cut short when the chanting got louder, signalling the crowd wasn’t far from us.

I may not have known Beast long, but I knew him well–like the back of my hand–and he was always very calm and collected. If anything, it was always me who got her panties in a twist but right now, hearing his haggard breath, feeling his heart beat faster under my cheek, and seeing fear flash in his eyes as the chants got louder, and the illumination from the fire torches got brighter, made me feel sick to my stomach.

I had caused this. This was my fault. If it wasn’t for me, Beast’s life wouldn’t be in danger right now, and there wouldn’t be an angry mob marching through the forest, thirsty for his blood. They wouldn’t back down as long as they believed Beast was alive, especially since Andrew–simply because Luke was his nephew–had a personal stake in this.

As if he could sense the direction of my thoughts, Beast pressed two fingers under my chin and lifted my head, forcing me to look him in the eyes.

“Pretty flower and Beast okay.” He promised, pushing the words into my mouth with his slick, wet tongue. If his life wasn’t in dire danger right now, my pussy would be creaming, and I wouldn’t be able to keep my hands off him. “Pretty flower and Beast together. Safe.” He assured me with a deep grunt, slanting his mouth over mine to deepen the kiss.

Neither of us came up for air as we kissed ferociously, the kiss–and the several other kisses in between–hot, passionate, and so filled with love. His arms were tightly wound around my waist, his chest pressed up against mine, and my hands were in his hair, tugging harshly as I struggled to control myself.

As always, he made me forget everything at the touch of his lips against mine and him holding me in his arms, but this time was different. It felt like the last time, and that made me want to bawl my eyes out again.

Beast had only been in my life for a matter of weeks. A little over a month now. In such a short span of time, he had quickly become the most important person in my life, and I couldn’t imagine life without him.

In my nineteen years, I had never felt as loved or special as Beast made me feel. Before him, I had never experienced love like this. My mother was a cold woman who hardly showed any affection, and my friends were great, but at the end of the day, I washed all their clothes so I could stay fed with herbal tea and stale bread.

I had never met anyone like Beast before. I had never felt unconditional love, let alone for nothing to exchange it with. Beast hadn’t once asked anything from me. The only thing of mine that he kept was my blanket which held no monetary value. Instead, he held me and loved me, and gave me the most insane pleasure, introducing me to this whole new world that I didn’t know existed.

He gave me so much even though I had so little to offer, yet not once did he complain. He met me with welcomed arms and sweet kisses each time, waiting day and night to see me again.

How could I be so lucky to have fallen in love with such a magnificent being that always made me feel like the most precious jewel in the world?

It was bittersweet that we now had the rug pulled out from under our feet. We had barely had the time to begin, and now our beautiful journey

was close to coming to an abrupt, gruesome end.

When the tears trickled down my face, I pressed one last watery kiss to his lips before pulling away. Staring up at him from under wet lashes, my heart broke as he attempted a soft, reassuring smile for me, and I couldn't resist the urge to throw myself into his arms and press my face into his chest.

"Plan," Beast told me, murmuring the words against the crown of my head.

I nodded into his chest, but I felt my heart ache at the crack in his voice. Pulling away before the angry mob discovered us, I wiped my tears and glanced up at him.

"We need a plan." I agreed with him. "We need to come up with something that gets us both out of this, alive and unscathed." The more I spoke, the more my lips turned down at the corners. "I got you into this mess, and I promise I'll get you out. No matter what it takes, I'm not going to let anything happen to you, Beast."

"Us." He whispered, cupping my face as he dropped a sweet, gentle kiss to the tip of my nose. "Nothing happen. We safe. Together."

"Together forever," I promised and couldn't resist leaning into him even though we needed a plan.

While I enjoyed the sanctuary of Beast's arms, allowing him to hold and comfort me even though he was the one in danger, I desperately tried to come up with a plan to save ourselves.

There was the obvious answer that we face the village people head-on. We could stand by each other's side and fight. Obviously, Beast would be doing most of the fighting as he was far more skilled than me, and I wouldn't know where to start, but the thought of him taking on an entire village by himself filled me with dread. I believed in him and trusted in his capability to protect himself, but there were so many of them and only one of him.

The other obvious answer was that we run away like originally planned and like Beast had done many times before. We would leave everything behind, and the two of us–now, the three of us–would run off to a faraway land where we could start over. However, as much as I tried to ignore it, the inkling feeling that even if we did run away to the other side of the land, word of Beast and I would spread from village to village and no matter where we went, we would never be safe.

Both plans had positives and negatives, but neither settled well with me. Neither provided us complete assurance that at the end of it all, we would make it out alive and safe.

And that’s when it hit me. The answer was simple.

For all of this to be over, Beast needed to die.

Chapter Forty

I hadn't seen Beast for the better half of an hour. After we separated, I sprung into action. It took a while, but I managed to find the angry mob as they trampled their way through the forest in search of him. As we weren't yet ready to put this plan into motion, I had kept my distance and instead, followed behind them from afar as they continued marching through the forest.

My ears perked up with every snap of a twig and rustle of some leaves. I wondered if it was Beast, but the shiver that ran down my spine told me it wasn't. Moments before I was discovered by whoever it was, a howl rang loud and clear through the forest, causing the ground to shake under my feet.

It was now or never.

With the murderous mob, it definitely had to be now.

Opening my mouth, I screamed as loud as I could. I screamed until my throat ached and felt raw. Once I caught the attention of the mob, I lifted the skirt of my dress, turned around and took off to run deeper into the forest.

It was difficult to see where I was going at this time of night, and I tripped over twigs and branches several times, but I continued running.

"Renalia!" Luke screamed after me, his voice sounding far closer than I liked. I pushed past the pain in my legs to run faster, needing to get to the stream before they caught up to me.

When I had shared my plan with Beast, I hadn't taken into consideration the fact that I was such a poor runner. That, and how fast the mob would be on my heels.

Thankfully, the stream finally came into view, and that was all the motivation I needed to curve my path and run down the bank, waiting for the men to emerge from the forest before I could proceed with the plan.

I had been to the stream a few times before with Beast. The last time we came here, we took a stroll down here, and Beast showed me that further down, the stream grew wider into a river before finally, at the very end, it fell over the edge to create a rocky waterfall.

If someone had the misfortune of tumbling over the edge, they would plummet to their death. And if the impact of dropping from such a height didn't kill them, the sharp rocks awaiting them at the bottom surely would.

"Renalia!" Andrew called after me this time. "Renalia, what are you doing? Don't do anything rash! Let's talk about this first!"

"Yes, Renalia. Let's talk about this." Luke added, just as stupid as his uncle. As if I was going to stop running simply because they asked me to. Instead, I pushed myself to run faster and when the stream began to widen, I knew I was close to the waterfall and the pivotal part of the plan.

"Stop running, Renalia!" Luke yelled, his voice far louder than before.

It wasn't loud enough to stop me, but it was loud enough for me to glance over my shoulder. When I spotted him only a few feet away from me, very soon within reaching distance, I cursed under my breath. If I didn't do something soon, Luke would catch me, and the entire plan would be ruined.

Even though it was earlier than I had planned, I held my breath and jumped into the water. The water hit me like a bucket of ice, but it wasn't enough to deter me. With the way Luke continued running alongside the bank of the river to catch up with me, I knew I didn't have time to get accustomed to the cold.

My teeth chattered in my mouth, my body shivered, and I felt the hairs on my arms stand, but I pushed those feelings aside and began swimming.

"Renalia!" Luke called out to me, his voice dripping with fear and desperation. "Don't worry, Renalia! I'll save you! Just hold on for me, okay?"

If I didn't want to risk losing my momentum, I would laugh at Luke and how delusional he was being.

"What are you doing, Renalia?" Luke continued to call after me, not nearly as close as before. Or perhaps that had more to do with the fact that I had the current of the water working in my favour, flowing in the

direction that I was swimming. “Why are you swimming? Look, I’m sorry for what happened earlier. Let me help you so we can talk about all of this. We can get the baby out of you. I know you made a mistake by letting that monster have you, but we can get rid of the monster and its baby, and then we can continue with our lives like none of this ever happened.”

Anger flared inside of me brighter than the light from their torches, but I bit my tongue and focused on swimming.

“Renalia! Stop swimming!” Luke continued to call after me, his voice far more distant than before. “Try to swim over to the edge so I can pull you out!”

I snorted at his stupidity once again, but the action only caused me to inhale a mouthful of water. I spluttered and coughed, my chest heaving as I slowed down.

When I felt like I couldn’t go on any longer, I attached myself to a large rock in the middle of the river. It was closer to the other bank, and there was no way Luke would be able to reach it without throwing himself into the water. He was still running after me with his arms outstretched, so I knew I didn’t have much time for this impromptu rest, but that didn’t stop me from glancing past him at the mob. A few men were running after Luke, trying to catch up with me, but the majority of them didn’t bother.

I watched as they surrounded a large creature that looked a lot like Beast in colouring and build, baring his teeth menacingly at the mob.

On any other occasion, the creature would have the upper hand with his large stature, jagged teeth and familiarity with the forest. However, with so many men surrounding him and all the weapons they had stashed on their persons, the chances of the creature coming out of this alive were slim to none.

They all looked murderous. Not just because I had shamed the village by getting pregnant out of wedlock but also for my association with Beast whom they deemed a monster. I could admit that I was scared in the beginning as well, but it didn’t take all that long to look past his ability to transform between his human and beast forms to see the gentle, loving being that he was.

My heart felt like it would beat out of my chest as I watched them move in on the creature, taking turns with their weapons of choice: fire from their torches, daggers, spears, pitchforks, and even a few axes. I

winced each time, struggling to watch the scene, but at the same time, I couldn't bring myself to look away.

A strangled gasp escaped me as I watched blood splatter from the creature, streaming across the face of his murderers. My breath grew heavy and shallow as I watched the life drain out of the creature, but I continued down the river as the water stopped for no one.

It was the most horrific sight I had ever seen, one which would forever be etched onto the back of my eyelids. I feared that I would never be able to close my eyes without seeing this scene, but I also knew this was the only way. The harsh reality was that both of us couldn't be alive. If the creature hadn't come in when he had, then more of the village men would have jumped into the stream to chase after me. The creature would have been killed anyway, and I would have gotten myself caught and dragged back to Stowe.

There was no point in sacrificing us both.

Unable to spare a second more as the group of men that had killed the creature had now started to chase after me, quickly starting to close the distance, I pushed myself away from the rock and continued swimming. My lungs ached from all the cold water that I inhaled, but I couldn't give up now. Not when I was so close to the edge. To the end.

"You don't have to do this, Renalia! You're making a mistake!" Luke called after me, his voice barely audible over the sound of the water sloshing around me. "You don't have to kill yourself! As long as your child isn't born an abomination, we'll tell everyone in Scotland that it's mine! We can get married as soon as you want and then we can leave! You don't have to see your mother again if you never want to! You don't have to visit Stowe if you don't want to! You'll never have to do anything you don't want to ever again!"

Despite how absurd and desperate Luke came across right now, there was one thing he had gotten right. As far as I was in control, I would never return to Stowe, and I would never see my mother ever again. It was bittersweet, but the good memories were few and far in between.

With determination pumping through my body, I pushed myself to swim faster and harder. When I finally neared the edge, I stopped moving and allowed the current to do with me as it pleased.

I had seen what the angry mob couldn't see in all their haste. I saw that the fur of the creature they murdered wasn't nearly as dark as Beast's, and

he was also a few sizes too small. However, with the distraction of me in the water, purposely bobbing up and down to make it look like I was finding it difficult to stay afloat, I knew they wouldn't notice the little details. That, and Luke was the only other person who had seen Beast in his true form. I could imagine that he had described Beast to them, and this creature, this large wolf, resembled Beast, but on a smaller scale.

Instead of murdering Beast, they killed a large wolf that simply resembled Beast. The real Beast was stationed at the bottom of the waterfall to catch me when I fell over the edge.

Right on the cusp of it, my lips parted and a loud, ear-splitting scream escaped me. My own ears rang painfully as my scream grew louder and shriller, slowly fading as I plummeted to what would have been my death if Beast wasn't waiting for me at the bottom. A startled gasp escaped me when I landed in his arms, and we both exhaled in relief, but our plan was far from over.

Without a moment to spare, Beast rushed to wade through the water with me still in his arms. I inhaled a splash of cold water as we hid in the cave behind the waterfall, yet another secret of the forest only Beast knew about as he was its longest resident.

I didn't know what would happen next or how long we would be stuck here, but we were together, and that was all that mattered. That was all that would ever matter.

Chapter Forty-One

Beast and I were on the brink of passing out from starvation and dehydration when we finally dared to crawl out from behind the waterfall. Consuming nothing but water and a handful of berries we finished on the first day could do that to you. After how close we had come to the end, it was a bad idea to stay near Stowe, but we couldn't possibly make it past this part of the forest without eating anything.

"Pretty flower wait," Beast demanded in a harsh whisper even though it was just us two in the clearing. I didn't blame him for being cautious. After everything we had been through, I could imagine that we would both be cautious for a very long time.

We had tasted death, and neither of us was interested in seconds.

I sat on a fallen log while Beast hunted. He wasn't away for very long but returned with four rabbits that had my mouth salivating and my stomach churning in hunger. After going without food for several days, we cleaned the bones of the rabbits in no time at all and even though Beast was just as starved as me, if not more, he handed me his last rabbit leg.

"No." I shook my head, trying to hand it back to him. "You're the one who'll be doing the running, and you'll be carrying me as well. You need the energy more than I do."

His face softened, and he leaned over to press a soft, chaste kiss to my lips. "For baby." He murmured, his eyes shining with pure love.

"The baby wants you to have half."

Despite how strained the past few days had been, an amused chuckle escaped Beast as he helped himself to half the meat before giving me the

rest. If I wasn't so starved, I would have noted that the rabbit was a little undercooked, but I would forever remember this as my favourite meal.

The longer we stayed here, the higher the risk of us being discovered. The last thing we needed was for Stowe to discover that we had played them, and instead of murdering Beast, they had murdered an innocent wolf. And instead of watching me die after throwing myself over the edge of the waterfall, I was very much alive and kicking.

We were finishing up the last of our meal when Beast froze beside me. His arm immediately curled around my waist as he jumped up to his feet and pulled me to his side.

"What is it?" I whispered, fearful that we had been discovered yet again. "Did you hear something? Is there someone nearby?"

Beast nodded and gestured for me to stay quiet. I held my breath and strained my ears to listen out for what he had heard. A few short moments passed before I heard their voices.

"I know she's going through a lot lately, but it's been four days, and she still hasn't washed my dress yet. How long do you think she's going to take?" A woman from Stowe tutted.

"You haven't heard?" The other woman asked.

"Heard what?"

"Maya is gone."

My breath hitched. Sensing this, Beast brushed his fingers through my hair and held me closer, comforting me in a way that only he could.

"What do you mean she's gone? Where did she go?"

"She left with Luke yesterday."

"To Scotland?"

"Yes."

"But she's still got my dress."

"I'm sure your dress is the last of her concerns right now. I think Maya is having a mid-life crisis. First, her daughter gets pregnant with the child of some sort of shape-shifting creature, then she kills herself by throwing herself off the edge of a waterfall when the creature was murdered. That's a lot for anyone to deal with. Especially someone like Maya."

"But why would she go up to Scotland with Luke? He's half her age, and he proposed to her daughter. Isn't that strange?"

"It's very strange. I can only imagine what must have been going on in their hut. No wonder Renalia was quick to fall in love with a monster.

Maybe that was her escape from the strange happenings in their hut."

"Maya was very quick to run away with Luke so soon after her daughter's death. What are they even going to do together in Scotland? How are they going to explain their connection to the King?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if they get married."

"Really? Do you think so?"

"The situation is so strange; I honestly wouldn't be surprised if that were the case."

Their voices began to fade as they walked past until I couldn't hear them anymore. I remained glued to Beast's side as their words washed over me. I couldn't say that I was surprised, but it still felt surreal to hear it.

I didn't care if my mother and Luke got married, or if she became a maid at the castle. Frankly, I was just glad that I would never have to see either of them ever again.

"Come on, Beast." I sighed with a small smile on my face, slipping my hand into his. I gave it a gentle squeeze and raised it to brush my lips against his knuckles. "There's nothing left for us here. Let's go and start our new life together."

Beast's eyes grew the slightest bit darker as he stared at me. His face softened, and I could tell he wanted to say something, but instead, he dropped a kiss on the crown of my head.

"Beast and pretty flower. Together. Forever." He promised and transformed into his creature, crouching on the ground for me to get on his back.

It was cliché, but we rode into the distance and never looked back.

Epilogue

FIVE YEARS LATER

Thinking back to what my life was like five years ago always made me feel a plethora of emotions. I remembered what our time hidden behind the waterfall was like. Mostly cold, hungry, and scared that the people of Stowe would discover we were still alive. I remembered hearing about my mother and Luke leaving for Scotland together. Sometimes I found myself wondering what had become of those two. Had they gotten married? Or did they split ways once they arrived at the castle?

Nineteen years was a long time to spend with a person so naturally, I wondered about my mother sometimes, but I didn't miss her for a second. Just like how I didn't miss a single thing from my old life.

Sometimes I still couldn't believe that our plan had worked. That we had managed to escape.

What could have become of us if we got caught? Would the village folk have killed Beast and cooked him up for a grand feast?

Would they have skinned him alive to turn his thick, luscious midnight fur into expensive blankets?

Would they have paraded his severed head around the village like a trophy?

Would they have forced me to watch?

What would have become of our child and me without Beast? I could only imagine that my mother would have pressured me into marrying Luke, but despite his promise, I couldn't imagine him raising another man's child. Especially not one he labelled an *abomination*.

Such thoughts always brought tears to my eyes, and it took everything I had to remind myself that it was in the past. We had escaped and survived, and as long as both of us lived, we would never allow something like that to happen to us again. Not when the stakes were so much higher this time.

After our escape, we travelled for what felt like weeks, only stopping to rest and hunt for food. We finally settled in the middle of a forest far, far away from Stowe. It was much farther west and near the sea, just as I had always dreamed.

“Mother! Francis keeps pulling my hair!” My youngest cried and launched herself at me, burying her face in my skirt and getting it damp with her tears.

“Francis.” I sighed, turning around to scoop my daughter into my arms while sending my son–four, soon to be five–an unimpressed look. He was always picking on his sister, but as soon as she fell over or hurt herself, he was always the first to tend to her. “What have I told you about pulling Maya’s hair?”

“Not to.” He sang, though the wicked, playful smirk remained on his face, looking just like his father. He wasn’t the least bit concerned that this had to be the hundredth warning this week that I had spoken to him about picking on his sister.

Even though my mother was always horrid to me, and our relationship was rocky at best, I felt compelled to call my second child Maya when Beast predicted she was a girl. It was my way of ending the cycle and starting over. Though I had to admit, a small part of me worried that due to her name, I wouldn’t be able to love or bond with my daughter as much as I did with Francis, my eldest. Beast had assured me that I was worrying too much, and relief washed over me when he was proven right after her birth, and I held her in my arms for the first time.

I didn’t know how my mother had done it because the moment Beast placed our little girl in my arms, I vowed that I would always love her with my whole heart and protect her with my life. Just as I did with my son.

My heart melted when I glanced down at my daughter, her face buried in the crook of my neck, her hands still fisting my dress. I shuffled her in my arms to hold her more comfortably–mindful of my large bump–and brushed a soothing hand down her fiery red locks.

“I’ll have a word with your brother,” I promised Maya, pressing a soft kiss to her small, button nose as I brushed my thumbs under her eyes to catch the last of her tears. “How about I make it up to you by taking you for a swim later? You can swim in your beast form.”

“Just you and me?” She sniffled, perking up at the idea. When I nodded, she wrapped her arms tightly around my neck and pressed a big kiss to my cheek.

“When your father gets back, I’ll get him to watch Francis and then the both of us can head down to the beach.”

“Oh, thank you, mother! You’re the best! I love you!” Maya gushed and wriggled in my arms, signalling that she wanted to be put down. As soon as her little feet touched the ground, she was off, rushing out of the hut. No doubt to tell her brother what I had just promised her.

I groaned at the argument that I knew would ensue next, and only because Francis refused to stop pulling his sister’s hair. I knew he only did it because she vocalised her hatred for it all the time and he found it funny, but how were you supposed to explain this to a three-year-old?

“I love you more than she does.” A gruff, husky voice told me, still laughing from having his daughter run under his legs to get out of the hut.

“If you truly love me as much as you claim, then go out there and get Francis to stop pulling Maya’s hair.” I huffed, though couldn’t keep the grin off my face as I stared back at my husband.

“Pretty flower,” Beast chuckled and wrapped his arms around my waist from behind with ease even with how large I already was from this third pregnancy. “You’re asking the impossible of me.”

“Then I’m mad at you.” I pouted, my words contradicting me as I snuggled deeper into his chest, craving only the warmth and comfort he could provide.

“How can I make it up to you?” He murmured, bowing his head to place a wet, open-mouthed kiss on the side of my neck.

“I can think of a few ways,” I whispered and angled my head to the side to give him more room. My eyes fluttered closed as his hands fisted my skirt and began bunching it up.

“Well, we’ll have to be quick because I’m sure Maya will return soon, demanding you take her to the beach like you promised her.” He pressed a kiss to the outer shell of my ear before raking his teeth down the lobe and sucking it into his mouth. His trousers dropped, and he pressed his hard cock into my seeping pussy from behind. My pussy ached deliciously and clenched in anticipation, hungry for him. Five years of this and I still couldn’t get enough. “She’s impatient like her mother.”

I opened my mouth to deny his claim, but the words were swallowed by a loud moan when he thrust forward and buried himself inside me up to the hilt, filling me completely to the point where I didn’t know where he stopped and I began.

Beast's POV

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS EARLIER

The first thing I acknowledged was how green the grass under me was as I lay on the ground. The second was how much my head hurt and how badly my teeth and gums ached. The third was the faint shouts from the distance, gradually getting louder, but I could barely focus on anything other than my pounding head.

The whole world shook as I finally pushed myself into a sitting position. My vision was blotchy, and I had to blink several times to make out my surroundings.

The grass was so much fresher and greener now that I could see properly. The earthy scent of the forest drifted to my nose, and I inhaled deeply, committing the smell to memory. The ground felt so soft and broke easily under my sharp fingernails. One swipe of my hand and the grass shredded.

This wasn't normal. Why were my nails so long and sharp?

I didn't have long to ponder the question as a quiet hum filled the clearing. My ears perked up, and I turned my head in the direction of the sound that gradually got louder and louder until it wasn't a hum anymore, but rather a large crowd of people coming this way, chanting something.

Relief washed over me at first. I had no idea where I was or how I had gotten here. My stomach also rumbled with hunger so hopefully, they would be able to help me out with a warm meal before I found my way.

The closer they got, the louder their chants got.

"Catch the monster! Kill the monster! Eat the monster!"

They chanted this over and over again until it was all I could focus on.

My eyes widened in fear, and a shiver ran down my spine as I connected the dots. When I realised I was the meal, I didn't spare a single moment as I sprinted away from the chants. I didn't know where I was going, just that I needed to get away from these people that demanded my blood and the meat off my bones.

What was wrong with me?

Why did they think I was a monster?

And why were they chasing after me with weapons?

My chest ached as I ran in the opposite direction of the humans, taking sharp turns wherever I could to throw them off my trail. My legs ached and threatened to give out from under me, but I couldn’t stop. Not when I would have to pay for the brief break with my life.

It was only when I broke into a clearing and spotted a river in the near distance that I slowed down. I was panting heavily by this point but forcefully dragged myself over to the water. The river was wide, and the humans would have a hard time getting to the other side. It would slow them down, giving me enough time to escape.

My legs stopped moving on their own accord when I reached the riverbank. I didn’t have any time to spare, but I couldn’t stop myself from staring back at the creature in the water. It was small. Larger than a dog but smaller than a wolf. His fur was darker than the night sky, made to look even darker with all the dirt it was matted with. His eyes were a sharp gold, cutting through the darkness and water as he stared back at me.

A chill ran down my spine, and I took a fearful step back. The creature took a step back as well. My eyebrows furrowed together, and the creature did the same. This continued as I moved left and right, even spinning around. The creature copied everything I did, and that’s when I realised it.

Me.

The creature was me.

My reflection.

It was the reason I was currently running for my life.

When the crazed, blood-thirsty humans broke into the clearing, not far from me, I leapt into the water without thinking. The width of the river was too large for me to make it over in one stride, but I was able to cross it, shake off the water and disappear into the forest before they even reached the riverbank.

TEN YEARS EARLIER

You'd think that after ten years, I'd be used to sleeping on the cold, hard ground every night, but apparently not. No matter how many nights I spent sleeping on the forest floor, it never got any easier. I grumbled and groaned as I stood up, stretching my arms high above my head and then to the side as I did every morning, trying to get all the kinks out.

I didn't know anything about my parents or have any recollection of my life before I woke up on the forest ground fifteen years ago, but I could imagine that either one or both of them were tall. That, or my height came from the monster inside of me.

What I did know, however, was that a man of my size wasn't made to sleep on the ground. Of all the humans that I spied on over the years, I was easily taller than all of them. I had seen men of similar build to me before, but they all ate heartily unlike me who resorted to eating only what I could hunt and occasionally steal from local villages when I got really desperate. There had been times when I surpassed their build, but always soon after the forest grew scarce of animals for me to eat. The fat and muscle were always quick to fall off, and when I got dangerously thin for my tall build, I was forced to relocate. Other times, I wasn't lucky enough to last in one place long enough. When I slipped up and villagers discovered me living in their forest, they suddenly developed a thirst for my blood and an appetite for my head on the tip of their pitchforks.

To protect myself, I always made sure to move as far away as I possibly could. I never wanted word of me to spread from village to village as that would put me in even more danger. By the time I neared the end of my teenage years, I had covered all of the North and moved further down South. I didn't know what I would do when I eventually ran out of land and forests to live in. Perhaps I would have to cross the sea and try a different part of the world.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, when it was just me and the forest, I wondered what my parents were doing. Were they still alive? Were they just like me? Or were they human and abandoned me when they discovered I was more animal than man?

I had no memories before I awoke in the forest fifteen years ago. I didn't know how old I was exactly, but I couldn't have been more than fix or six at the very most, though I had always been on the taller side.

Did my parents think of me? Would I be throwing away all my chances of ever meeting them if I crossed the sea?

Did I even want to meet them after they abandoned me?

When my stomach ached in hunger, I knew it was time for my first meal of the day. The animals of the forest had grown scarce over the past week, and I spent multiple nights in a row going to sleep with nothing but berries and river water in my stomach. The hunger was starting to make me sick, and the faint smell of fresh cooking from the village even sicker. They must keep chickens because if I couldn't find wild animals to hunt, neither could they.

The thought of starting yet another day with berries and water had my stomach churning. Before I could talk myself into what a bad idea it was, I transformed into my creature and trotted out of the forest.

If someone saw me in this form, they would think that I was a large wolf and try to hunt me for a feast. Hopefully, before then, I would steal some food and retreat to the forest. As long as I didn't take too much, it wouldn't hurt the humans, but I needed to take enough to keep me going while I decided what to do next. Either expand my scope for hunting or move to a place where I haven't preyed on all the wild animals yet.

It was early in the morning so most of the village was still asleep. Only a few had already awoken and started cooking. Hopefully, that would keep them distracted while I stole some of their food stock to stay alive.

I knew they had chickens because I heard them clucking all day, every day. They screeched even louder when it was time for one of them to become the next meal. Following the sound of them clucking and the distinct smell of their faeces, I tracked down a chicken coop in no time. It was large in diameter, but I couldn't spy more than a handful of chickens clucking about on a morning stroll around the coop.

There was only one of me and hundreds of people that lived in the village. If I took too many chickens, I would be taking food out of the mouth of hungry children.

I may be a beast or an *abomination* as humans often liked to call me after they discovered my existence, but a part of me was still human. That human part of me only allowed me to swipe one chicken. A quick crush of

its neck rendered the animal dead, and its blood stained the fur around my snout as I turned to carry it back to the forest.

It was a bloody ordeal, and I'm sure I looked quite a sight, but I couldn't focus on anything other than getting this chicken inside my stomach. It had been nearly a week since I had eaten meat, and even longer since I had eaten until I was full. One chicken wouldn't be enough to fill my hunger, but it would sate my appetite for a little while. Hopefully, I would be able to find some animals to hunt soon, otherwise, I would have to resort to stealing from the humans again.

Perhaps it was the hunger that made me careless, or I started celebrating the small win too early, but I transformed back into my human the moment I passed the tree-line into the forest.

When I heard the small gasp from behind me, I realised what a grave mistake I had made.

"Beast!" The woman yelled after the initial shock wore off. "It's a beast! A monster!"

Her words rang in my ears as I ran away with the bloody chicken and its loose feathers still in my mouth. My beast loved the raw taste, but it made the human part of me gag. However, with the woman screaming at the top of her lungs, calling me a beast, a monster, an abomination, and whatever else she could think of to describe me, I knew having a dead chicken in my mouth was the least of my worries right now.

Now that I had been seen–a wolf-like creature transforming into a human–I couldn't stay here anymore. I was on the fence about it before, but the decision had been made for me now.

If I wanted to stay alive, then I needed to leave.

Within the next few minutes, half the village would have gathered, ready to chase me with pitchforks and whatever other weapons they had at their disposal.

The worst part about getting caught wasn't having to run for my life or having blood-thirsty humans wanting to parade my severed head on the tip of their spears as a trophy, but knowing that I needed to leave and start over again.

Being all by myself was a curse in itself but having no place to call home was so much worse.

6 MONTHS EARLIER

Four months.

I had been living in these forests for four months. That was the longest I had ever stayed in one place before, and each day that passed felt like I was on borrowed time. Animals were abundant, and the villagers hardly ever wandered into the forest. I had even been able to sneak into the village a few times to swipe some bread and freshly cooked food without anyone realising it.

But none of those things was the best part about living here. They were all upgrades from all the other places I'd lived before, but they didn't even come close to comparing to the beautiful girl that lived in the village.

Her hair was red like fire and fell to her waist. It was curly and always in a little bit of a mess. Kind of like my hair. Her eyes were a soft brown, somewhat in the middle of my human eyes, and my creature eyes. She didn't have many dresses like the other girls, but I could tell the green one was her favourite because she wore it the most.

She lived in a small hut closest to the forest line with an older woman and was the only human who frequently ventured out to the forest. Mostly during the night and early morning. Always when no one was looking.

I liked to think that she was somewhat like me. She mostly kept to herself and the older woman she lived with. Sometimes she spent time with other girls from the village, but it was never for long. She always had to rush home and help the older woman wash clothes. When she was with her, she kept her head down and did as she was told. Even from the distance, I could tell that the older woman had a sharp tongue and a cold heart, yet the girl never rebelled. She took everything in her stride, and when she was alone–mostly when she was on her walks in the forest–that's when I saw her true self.

In the village, she was shy and always did as she was told. If she didn't, she got berated. But in the forest, she was as free as a bird, and it really showed. She walked to her heart's content and took everything in. She stopped to smell the flowers and pet the squirrels. She walked a different path nearly every time, and she glanced around with curiosity

dancing in her eyes. When she got tired, she sat against the bark of a tree and admired the beauty of the forest. She felt the grass under her fingers, and she avoided stepping on the flowers. She found everything interesting. She wanted to look at everything, touch everything, smell everything.

She was like a curious kitten, always turning her head in different directions to take in something new. She was nothing like that when she was back in the village.

She was delicate like a flower. Beautiful like one too.

I nicknamed her: pretty flower.

My pretty flower.

I liked to think that my pretty flower was somewhat like me. That we were cut from the same cloth.

After I stumbled across her the first time while I was on a run in my beast form, I was always on the lookout for her. I found my eyes watching the small, withering hut without even realising it. When she was out, washing clothes and working with the older woman, I watched her. And when she was inside the hut, I watched it, waiting for her to come outside, so I feast my eyes on her once again.

I sometimes wondered how she would react if I revealed myself and offered to help her. When she winced in pain or looked on the brink of tears when the older woman said something to her, I longed to comfort her. My heart ached for her, and my arms craved to wrap around her. To hold her tight to my chest and not let go until she was feeling better.

When she was walking in the forest, I wished I could reveal myself to her. To say hello and ask if I could join her on the walk, but I could never do that.

There were many times that I fought against the thought of it, but there was always something holding me back. Perhaps it was my lack of communication with humans–I wasn't exposed to them much and found it difficult to pick up the strange language they spoke–or that clothes never appealed to me no matter how many I stole over the years. They never seemed to fit me right and the few pieces that I could squeeze into, they tore quickly so I stuck with stealing food.

The fantasy continued to play on my mind, but the reality of the situation didn't change. It hadn't thus far, and I wasn't optimistic enough to hope for a miracle. Because that was what it would take for my pretty flower to look at me like she didn't think I was a monster.

A miracle.

Humans never wanted anything to do with me once they saw me in my true form. They didn't care about me living in the forest outside their village or occasionally stealing their food. They didn't care about getting to know me or that I wasn't a threat to them. All they cared about was killing me or driving me away when they eventually found out about me. Because they always did.

My pretty flower wouldn't be any different.

Once she found out about me, the truth about me and the monster that I was, she wouldn't want anything to do with me.

Just like everyone else.

TWENTY YEARS LATER

If someone told me twenty years ago that I would be comfortable with a human that wasn't my pretty flower, I wouldn't have believed them for a single second. I also wouldn't believe that this said human would be living with us and make the best carrot cake I had ever tasted. It was even better than Renalia's, but the words would never pass my lips.

"Father." Craig, my son-in-law, greeted me with a warm smile as soon as I entered the main hut after a long morning of hunting. "I made your favourite carrot cake."

I was quick to press a finger over my lips, my eyes wide as I glanced around the hut. Thankfully, it was only Craig and me in here.

"Don't catch your mother hearing you say that. I don't want her thinking that I like another cake over hers." I chuckled and moved to pour myself a glass of water.

"It's probably the only thing I can make just as good as her." He chuckled with a bright smile. "But I wouldn't dare say that. She might put me on cooking duty, and you and I both know her cooking is to die for."

"You can say that again." I grinned. "Do you know where she is?"

"She told me she was going to water the flowers."

My grin widened. "I'll go help her."

Craig shot me a knowing smirk, and I returned it right at him when Maya walked past me into the hut to join her husband.

That's right. You heard me.

Husband.

My daughter, Maya, a creature like me, had a human husband. And not just her. My eldest son, Francis, was also married to a human.

Ten years ago, we had given up the constant travelling and living in the forest. With three children under ten and a fourth on the way, the lifestyle didn't suit us anymore. We moved as far west as we could, and for the past ten years, we awoke to the sound of the sea hitting the rocks every morning. The land we occupied was large and had been abandoned for decades. The elderly owner was more than happy to get it off his hands, and this was now our new home.

When our family continued expanding and the children started growing older–specifically when Francis brought his now-wife, Mary, home to meet us for the first time–Renalia and I knew that we couldn't continue living under the same roof for much longer. Since the decision had been made, we had built a hut for Francis and Maya to live with their respective partners–both human–and were set to start on another for our third child, Chloe. She was only fourteen so wouldn't be moving out of the family hut for a few years at least, but it had turned into a pastime now, and I enjoyed working on the huts alongside Francis who also had a knack for it.

Renalia joked that if we kept this up, we would have our own little mini village in no time, and she wasn't far off. With six kids and another on the way–most probably our last one–we were a mini-village of our own.

Chloe and Anya–our fourth child at the age of eleven–had tagged along with Francis and Mary when they went shopping at the market. The market only came once a week as there weren't many humans living in the area, but that worked out perfectly for me and non-human my family. And to think, I had spent more than half my life alone, completely unaware that I could be this happy.

I had my pretty flower to thank for that.

"You were gone for a while today. How was hunting?" Renalia asked, leaning back against my chest when I wrapped my arms around her from behind. I pressed my hands over her stomach where our son and last child grew. She was only three months along and sported a tiny bump, but she already had that pregnancy glow I loved so much.

You'd think that after twenty years together the appeal of sex would wear off, but I couldn't stop filling her up, and she couldn't stop begging for it.

After Anya, we had Oliver, seven, and Aaron, four. We still had yet to come up with a name for baby number seven, but we had plenty of time to decide.

"It was great." I nuzzled my face into the crook of her neck and I pressed a soft kiss there. "I caught a pretty meaty deer today, and some squirrels."

Her lips turned up into a soft smile. "We haven't had deer in a while."

"I thought you weren't a fan of deer."

“I’m not. The baby is.” Renalia grinned and turned around in my arms. She pressed her hands to my chest, craning her head to glance up at me. “I never knew I could be so happy.” She exhaled in a small voice.

A low questioning grunt escaped me.

“Maybe it’s the pregnancy hormones, but I’ve been doing a lot of thinking this morning. My life has completely transformed since meeting you, Beast. I never knew I could be this happy. I never knew I could love someone as much as I love you, and have so many kids that my heart overflows with love for them all. Francis and Maya are married, and I love their partners like my own children. Soon, they’ll start families of their own, and we’ll be grandparents. I never knew love like this. Not before you, Beast. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for saving me. I don’t know what my life would have been like without you.”

Something stirred in my chest, and I bowed my head to press a soft kiss to her plump, juicy lips that enticed me even more than they did twenty years ago.

“I’m the lucky one,” I whispered against her mouth, teasingly licking along the seam of her bottom lip, asking for entrance. She barely parted her lips before my greedy tongue dove in for a taste. “Thank you for loving this beast and trusting me enough to run away with me. You didn’t have to. Many people wouldn’t have gone to such lengths to save a creature that was half-human, half-beast, but you did. And I love you so much for it, my pretty flower. Thank you for this beautiful life that we’ve built together. For all our children. Without you, I’d be a shadow of the man I am today. I am forever in your debt, my pretty flower, and while I’ll never be able to repay you, I’ll happily spend the rest of my life trying to.”

When tears sprung to her eyes, and she tried to blink them away, it was my cue to fulfil my promise. I bowed my head and claimed her lips in a sweet kiss.

Twenty years later, there still wasn’t a better feeling than having my wife, the love of my life, in my arms, pressed up against me and kissing me back with just as much passion, love, and fervour.

I never thought the beauty–my pretty flower–I had been watching from the forest all those years ago would ever notice me, and if she did, I thought she’d want my head on a pitchfork like all those other humans.

I never imagined it possible that the beauty could ever love the beast, but my pretty flower proved me wrong.

Coming Soon

The Blind Date - coming summer 2023

Ten blind dates in four days. Number one was a raging alcoholic, number four still lived with his parents, number six was a gold digger, and number nine was a woman. Number ten, however, was Cedric Barlowe.

Saffron agreed to ten blind dates a month in hope that it would get her parents off her back. But of the bunch of weirdos her parents claimed were *'absolutely perfect'* for her, the one to stand out–in all the wrong ways–was Cedric. He was self-centred, rude, obnoxious, and a borderline narcissist–the opposite of her type, but she can't stop thinking about him. Perhaps that's down to her seeing a few cracks in the walls he was determined to keep up, or running into each other at every chance encounter, thanks to their parents' meddling, but Saffron finds herself growing fonder of Cedric than she's willing to admit. Even to herself.

It appears there's more to Cedric than expensive suits and corporate chit-chat. The more time they spend together, the more she sees the real Cedric. After a hot, electric kiss, they both know they can't deny their feelings for each other any longer. But how are they supposed to give this enemies-to-lovers relationship a fair shot with their parents eagerly watching their every move like it was their favourite reality TV show?

With her parents already in love with Cedric, Saffron knows it will have to be serious. The pressure for things to work out would be too much, and they feared it would destroy them before they even began. Agreeing to date in secret while keeping up the pretence of hating each other in the presence of others, they think they'll stand a fair shot.

It goes great at first, until it doesn't, and then everything spirals out of control.

Thank you!

Thank you for reading my book! I would truly appreciate it if you could take the time to leave a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads. It helps us authors out more than you can imagine!

I would like to thank all my readers on Patreon, Inkitt, Wattpad, and other online platforms. Thank you for believing in me, for reading my work and for loving my characters as much as I do.

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